





English Men of Letters

EDGAR ALLAN POE

## BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Queer Street	1932
The Enchanted Village	1933
Tom Tiddler's Ground	1934
Old King Cole	1936

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Poems, 1912-1932	1933
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# EDGAR ALLAN POE

BY

EDWARD SHANKS

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TO MY MOTHER



## PREFACE

IF American scholars (and, for that matter, American publishers) had bestowed on the text of Poe one-tenth of the labour which has been devoted to the events of his life, the task of the commentator would be a great deal easier. That his life should have excited the curiosity of investigators is indeed not at all remarkable: his own mystifications and mendacities make a positive challenge, apart from the intrinsic interest of his strange, unhappy character. But it is extraordinary that so little attention should have been given to the work of the man through whom was made America's first great contribution to the literature of the world.

On the biographical side, Mr. Hervey Allen, in *Israfel*, has done what is needed once and for all. A lapse of several years found him unable, in a new edition, to add anything of moment to what he had already written, and it is extremely unlikely that any discovery can now be made which will appreciably alter our view of Poe's life. To Mr. Allen's authoritative work I must here express with all possible emphasis my great indebtedness.

But on the textual side hardly anything has been done. Probably the best edition of Poe's complete works ever produced is that of Professor James A. Harrison. But that was published a good many years ago and has long been out of print. To-day there is no edition available which is even conformable with the best principles of the publisher's craft, let alone one which is provided with a proper *apparatus criticus*. It seems astonishing that there should be no Americans

to do for Poe what, for example, Buxton Forman did for Keats, Earle Welby and Stephen Wheeler for Landor, or Mr. E. V. Lucas for Lamb.

The current versions of Poe's works date back to the dark ages of editing and publishing. One such, published in New York in 1927, has the benefit of an introduction by Mr. Allen, in which he says:

The main interest in any writer whose works remain alive must of necessity be most legitimately centred in what he wrote. . . . The most essential thing then is to have available a conveniently arranged, accurately edited and complete text of his work.

Wise words! But the volume to which they are prefixed omits the *Journal of Julius Rodman*, and such editorial notes as it provides are beneath contempt. (I hasten to add that Mr. Allen has no responsibility for them.) One of them is quoted later on in these pages—on p. 120. Here is another, which is meant to illuminate Poe's shallow and flashy paper on cryptography:

(Poe's writings on Cryptography formed the basis for deciphering one of the most important secret code messages of the Germans during the World War. Also named Secret Writing.—Ed.)

It might, perhaps, be interesting to meet Ed.

It would be extravagant to ask Mr. Allen, who has spent much time in the accomplishment of a valuable task, to undertake the production of a definitive edition of Poe. But I write what I do here in the hope that it may catch the eye of some American patron of letters who will be moved to supply what is lacking. Nowhere more easily than in his own country could he find the scholarship, at once patient and acute, which would be required.

E. S.

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## CHAPTER I

### POE'S AMERICA

THE *History of the American People*, which was written by the late President Wilson, has for one of its adornments a portrait of Edgar Allan Poe. This is the passage which is thus illustrated:

It was singular how the signs multiplied of change and a new age coming in. A whole generation of new writers came suddenly into prominence during those first years of railways and steam craft (1828-1841): Hawthorne, Poe, Whittier, Longfellow, Emerson, Lowell, Holmes, Prescott, Bancroft; Mr. Justice Story and Mr. Justice Kent; Henry Wheaton, Francis Lieber, Henry C. Carey, John James Audubon and Asa Gray—men of letters, law writers, publicists, economists, men of science. Poe and Audubon were of the South, the rest were of the North, where leisure was coming with increase of wealth, stimulation of thought with increase of action.

After this one appearance, Poe seems to vanish from the history of the American people. But, though his career may be immaterial to that branch of studies, the facts of American history are not irrelevant to a full account of him. If we are to understand him as a whole and as a unity, we must know something about the world into which he was born and the society in which he lived. Without this knowledge, we shall

find ourselves faced by apparently inexplicable contradictions.

Sir Edmund Gosse has said, and not without much justification, that "if we were to call up Poe as a social character of his age, he would probably arise before us a ring-tailed roarer at the great meeting of Watertoast Sympathisers", the equal at least of Mr. Zephaniah Scadder. Indeed often, while we read Poe, whether he is loftily quarrelling with the "Frogpondians" of Boston, or merely asking for the loan of twenty dollars, we cannot help feeling that Poe's America is simply Martin Chuzzlewit's America—or, perhaps, Mrs. Trollope's. At times he seems perfectly to resemble the "Southern Gentleman" of unfair legend. The dignity of his phrases is so large, the excuses he makes are so shabby, and the loan he asks is so small. This is in his letters. In his journalism he breathes too often the magniloquent spirit of all provincialism. His excessively pompous use of the editorial "we", his haughtily vulgar references to rivals and enemies, his stilted facetiousness, all these irresistibly remind one of Mark Twain's and Artemus Ward's joyous pictures of the American newspaper in the earlier days and in the ruder places. He himself once wrote a skit of this nature—a pitiful poor thing called "X-ing a Paragrab". But he frequently came in complete seriousness very close to his own parody.

It is extraordinarily easy, of course, to make a life-like portrait of a man of genius while omitting all concrete evidence that he *was* a man of genius. M. André Maurois has thus produced a brilliant and convincing study of a Shelley who gave little, if any, of his time or thought to the hard work involved in the

writing of poetry and much to the indulgence of his temperamental peculiarities. This was quite consistent with itself, but, the more lifelike it was, the more misleading became the impression which it conveyed. It would be possible, by diverting the emphasis from his poetry, his stories and his more serious criticism, to give a plausible account of Poe, in which he should appear as a comic character, as something in the nature of a Zephaniah Scadder in real life. And, since this aspect of him is relatively unfamiliar in England, an English critic feels some temptation to dwell on it. But such a narrative would depend on the talent of its author for producing simple and lively fiction out of the more complex fact, and the better he succeeded the less he would tell us about Poe.

The "Martin Chuzzlewit" side of Poe's life is nevertheless one term of the contradiction. The other is to be found in a dozen places, not merely in the finer part of his own work but also in the writings and the careers of, for example, Baudelaire and Mallarmé, either of whom would have been startled if they could really have seen the editor of *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine* in his office or in the tavern or at home. The French Decadence had, for the most part, a sort of aristocratic flavour in its habits, even in its privations and dissipations. Poe achieved the aristocracy he dreamt of only in his dreams and, sometimes, in his compositions—never in his life. One must separate his dreams and his work from the rest of him to understand the first impression he made on a few outstanding and receptive minds in Europe. That impression is described as well as anywhere else in Herbert Trench's centenary ode:

Therefore we hail him, winged poet undated,  
Backward-gazer, seer Chaldean belated,  
Hymning Terror and Chaos, as Earth in her vagrance  
Leaves long behind her in space wild tresses of fragrance—  
Hymning all wonder as momentarily grey Earth breaketh  
Still into spaces new, and new-eyed awaketh!

The Poe of the begging-letters or of the editorial and critical polemics could not have sent forth such a manifestation of his personality across the Atlantic. But fortunately, for a long while, Europe knew but little of that side of him. He lost his local accidents in the sea-passage. They might, to be sure, have been discerned, and correctly enough, at least between the lines of Griswold's venomous memoir. But Europe was, very naturally, less likely than America to believe Griswold, and also less disposed to think that his accusations, supposing them to have been justified, mattered very much. Even to London, the idea of a poet killing himself by his dissipations was not exactly surprising: to the Paris of that period it seemed to settle him very happily in the great tradition.

Europe could see him, then, with greater clarity than America, as the "poet undated". There was no one there of whom he had borrowed money and failed to repay it, no one whom he had offended in a drunken fit, no one who had suffered from his wild passions of envy, when his sense of injustice turned to something like a madness and he used all his powers of expression merely to wound those whom he thought undeservedly luckier than himself. Poe is to this day a noteworthy example of a prophet with at any rate not enough honour in his own country, but the reasons for that are discoverable and, when they are understood, involve no special credit or discredit to anyone concerned.

There are two legends of Poe. One, which we may call the European, sees him almost exclusively as the human counterpart of the angel Israfel and, if it considers at all the material circumstances of his life, sees them in the same light as he did when he wrote:

If I could dwell  
Where Israfel  
Hath dwelt, and he where I,  
He might not sing so wildly well  
A mortal melody,  
While a bolder note than this might swell  
From my lyre within the sky.

The angel in the gutter may be a theme for the highest sort of tragedy. But if the spectator close at hand sees even a slight movement of the recumbent seraph which suggests that he is more or less at home, that he has become subdued to what he lies in, then some of the grandeur of the tragedy departs, and the realities of the gutter, the colour of its waters, their smell, and what floats in them, take its place. Those in Europe who took an interest in Poe conceived of his misfortunes as originating in dissipations in the grand manner. They imagined him as wasting his powers amid the splendours of Arnheim and could not help discerning in him something of the austere and aristocratic melancholy with which he endowed his heroes.

But the legend of him which took shape in America during his last years and the years which immediately followed was of a different sort. America knew of newspaper-offices where he had been employed on a pittance and whence he had been dismissed for insobriety. It knew of the boarding-house kept by Mrs. Clemm in order to help to maintain her feebly and foolishly, and not at all grandly, dissipated son-in-law.

It remembered how, when there seemed to be a way out of his miseries by appointment to a government sinecure, he threw away his chance by being drunk all the time he was in Washington in search of it. It saw also a "Southern gentleman", of the type which has been caricatured in American literature down to quite recent days—there is such a portrait in at least one story by O. Henry. He was neatly and cleanly dressed, except at the worst moments, but with a depressing air of shabby gentility about his clothes. He was inclined to lie concerning his ancestry, his early circumstances, his adventures and the estimation in which he was held abroad: his anxiety to show that he was appreciated in France has led many bibliographers to waste valuable time in searching for early translations which never existed save in his own fancy. He not only held, justly, but also proclaimed, unwisely, a high opinion of his own powers, combined, more unwisely still, with a very low opinion of the powers of most of his contemporaries. He did not add to his general attractiveness by continually owing, and cadging for, sums of a pitiful smallness, the lenders of which were as likely as anyone else to be the victims in one of his fits of envious rage. The closer eye of America saw, in short, an unmistakable element of bitterly comic squalor in the tragedy.

The tragedy nevertheless did occur, and it must be faced in all its details by anyone who wishes to understand what it was that Poe did and why he left so much that he might have done himself to the men who came after him. In all its details, however painful they may be—for the really tragic fact about the sensitive genius who goes under among men more capable but less fine is never merely the fact that he goes under. The screw

has its final turn when, in the process, he is forced to sacrifice some of his fineness, and loses therewith some of his pride and confidence in himself. If Poe could at the end of his life have impartially surveyed the incidents of it, he might, we can believe, have regarded with equanimity his material failure. It is no shame for a poet not to be able to succeed in a material world. But *he* could not so have thought of the petty stoopings, shifts, lies and promise-breakings to which his failure drove him—even if we can see them in a better perspective. His visit to Washington and its consequences made a miserable turn in his fortunes, but he might still have held himself superior to what one of his friends there, Dow, called the “senseless creatures, who, like oysters, keep sober and gape and swallow everything”. But could he equally forgive himself for the false, strained, anxious facetiousness of the letter of excuses which he had to write to Dow and Thomas after his return?

All these things must be considered when Poe is considered. To ignore them does no service to his fame and much disservice to our understanding of it. His fame and his influence are, in a very high degree, matters of importance. The figure that he presents to us to-day and that he has presented to others in the past shares, to a striking and unusual extent, in the total significance of his work. He lives not only in his own poems but also (one might almost say, even more) in those of a long line of successors. His part in the development of the short story—even of that commercial article which is called the magazine-story—makes nearly as interesting a subject for the critic as do his stories themselves. It can be maintained with at least plausi-

bility that he was the true parent of that movement which swept over Europe in the latter half of the nineteenth century and which is described sometimes as the "Decadent", and sometimes as the "Symbolist", movement. These are questions which must be considered in a later chapter. But the fact that his genius has produced results so largely by way of influence, as compared with direct performance, originates simply in its having been maimed for performance by several causes which were outside his own control. These must be known if we are to account for our experiences in reading him. We find in him the wildest oscillations between good and bad. A poem that has in it, beyond any possible mistake, something as beautiful as new will have also phrases and lines not to be explained unless we suppose that the sensibilities of the author were in a numbed condition when he wrote them. *The Masque of the Red Death*, a story almost without flaw whether in imagery or in diction, has for a companion piece that incredibly stupid and ineffective buffoonery *King Pest*. At one moment, Poe is as bold and as fertile a spirit as ever enriched the literature of the world: at the next, he is a hack-writer knowing no more than the way to fill a few pages somehow. Some of the reasons for this, which were spiritual or mental or pertaining to his physical constitution, also must be treated in another chapter. Some of them, however, sprang simply from the place and time of his birth and it will be convenient to set down here some observations on the world into which he was born and in which he worked and died.

It is perhaps a pity that we find the chief English evidence for the characteristics of Poe's America in two very lively writers who returned to England from the



sub-continent with a very lively sense of grievance. Dickens, besides suffering all manner of physical discomforts, was annoyed by finding that not every American shared his views on pirated editions of works by English authors. He had also lost money in the collapse of the Cairo City and Canal Company—Cairo being the “New Eden” of *Martin Chuzzlewit*. Mrs. Trollope sailed up the Mississippi with a fantastic provision of the modern American department-store. It was almost as though Montezuma should have gone alone and unarmed into Spain in order to ravish the treasures of Madrid. Those whom she generally calls “the natives” called her venture “Trollope’s Folly”. She sailed home again and proceeded to relieve her feelings in two entertaining volumes.

We must not suppose, then, that either *Martin Chuzzlewit* or the *Domestic Manners of the Americans* gives a just account of the United States in Poe’s time. But we shall probably not go far wrong if we take them as depicting in concentrated form that in Poe’s environment which was inimical to him. From neither of them, of course, do we learn anything about Poe himself. Dickens went to Philadelphia in 1842 and there met him, but in *American Notes* he displays a greater interest in the prison-system than in arts and letters. When Mrs. Trollope arrived at the mouth of the Mississippi on Christmas Day, 1827, the young man was serving under the name of “Edgar A. Perry”, at Fort Moultrie on Sullivan Island, afterwards the scene of *The Gold Bug*. He had already published *Tamerlane and Other Poems*, but over the signature of “A Bostonian”, and it is not surprising that Mrs. Trollope seems not to have heard of him. She did, however, as Dickens did not,

devote some attention to the state of letters in America and she found it horrible. She speaks of an "immense exhalation of periodical trash" and remarks that "where newspapers are the principal vehicles of the wit and wisdom of a people, the higher graces of composition can hardly be looked for". She adds a comment on "the inflated tone of eulogy in which their insect authors are lauded" and quotes the following sentence from a review in a New York paper:

The lovers of impassioned and classical numbers may promise themselves much gratification from the muse of Brooks, while the many-stringed harp of his lady, the Norna of the Courier Harp, which none but she can touch, has a chord for every heart.

It would be unfair to say that this stuff can be paralleled in Poe's reviews, but he too did a good deal in the way of lauding "insect authors", and, in those reviews in which he did, the modern reader can still hear, distant but unescapable, the same note as in the passage which filled Mrs. Trollope with amused disgust. Thus he writes:

Mrs. Amelia Welby has nearly all the imagination of Maria del Occidente, with a more refined taste; and nearly all the passion of Mrs. Norton, with a nicer ear, and (what is surprising) equal art.

Again, praising a poem by Mrs. Estelle Anna Lewis, he quotes, with admiring italics:

Fresh blows the breeze on Tarick's *burnished* bay,  
The *silent* sea-mews bend them through the spray :  
*The Beauty-freighted barges bound afar*  
*To the soft music of the gay guitar,*

and then observes that "in no case can the loftier qualities of a truly great poem be conveyed through the

citation of its component portions, in detail, even when long extracts are given—how much less, then, by such mere *points* as we have selected”. The author of *Israfel* and all the scattered reflections on poetry might have been expected to know that Mrs. Lewis had not written a “truly great poem”. But he was often, and naturally, inclined to accept the low standards of an isolated and still crude community. The contrast between the Poe who did so and the Poe who so boldly applied his principle of poetry to *Paradise Lost* is, at first sight, almost shocking. It is like the contrast between the spirit which lived in the domain of Arnheim and the body which found its death in the boozing-kens of Philadelphia.

But his position in America can hardly find a parallel in that of a genius of equal rank anywhere in the history of literature. Goethe lamented that he and his generation had all to do for themselves, that they had no models in their own language. But the language and the country of Goethe and his contemporaries had traditions settled on the soil on which they lived and had grown up. The traditions of the language and the literature into which Poe was born had originated thousands of miles from the country in which they were still seeking to acclimatise themselves. At an early age, he was taken to the home of that language and literature, an experience which must have had an unsettling effect on a temperament so unstable. (It is probable that some of his later fantastic inventions about travels in Europe express longings he was not able in any other manner to satisfy.) In his own country he was shockingly isolated. It was one of his misfortunes to be a Southerner, and the South, in the words of a later poet, “was never

much given to literature". The other minds of the time which, like his, were capable of a cosmopolitan view and knew how to use the standards of the Old World as a measure for the productions of the New were all concentrated in the North and he came little into contact with them. They, moreover, were cosmopolitan mainly in virtue of their scholarship and in this sphere Poe was no better than an irritating charlatan. He was the raw material for scholars, but he could never be one of them and he could never accommodate himself to the fact. He had about him no equals and few who could so much as pretend to understand him. Alone, and without criticism well enough informed to control him, he lacked intellectual discipline and veered from ecstatic acceptance of Mrs. Estelle Anna Lewis as a truly great poet to those ferocious attacks on contemporary reputations by which he deservedly earned the nickname of "the tomahawk man". His parade of learning, of wide and curious reading (for the most part no more than a parade), is as revealing as it is pathetic. It betrays at once what basis of culture his soul desired and how much he suffered in mind and character by living among people whom he could too easily impress.

It is not easy to feel certain that a place in the society of the Northern Brahmins would have greatly benefited him. They too, in their way, were bound by the conditions to which American culture had then attained. They clung, on a soil which their whole mental heritage denounced as strange and treacherous, to the steady sobriety of good letters: there was no place among them for an unruly and innovating genius, less than no place for one who pretended to have read so much more than

he had. And that soil, for men who cherished, and wished to be judged by, the European tradition of good letters, *was* still strange and treacherous. Except in the neighbourhood of the Northern seaboard, the Americans were with difficulty finding their feet under new conditions. In the year of Poe's birth, the settled territory was not much more than a fringe along the Eastern coast, and the Louisiana Purchase had been effected only a bare half-dozen years before. The election of Andrew Jackson to the Presidency, which some historians regard as the beginning of modern American history, was an event of his youth. Shortly after the Mexican War and the annexation of Texas and California, he died. Amid this hurry of events, there was a natural tendency to leave literature on one side altogether until things had settled down a little. Besides, it was easier, and very much cheaper, to import a literature which had already an unquestionable hall-mark from the other side of the Atlantic.

It was not, in fact, English authors alone who had reason to complain of American literary piracy. They had even less reason than their American colleagues, for they lost at worst only their profits from a possible second market, whereas the American author was fatally injured, in the only market that was open to him, by this unwilling competition. More than one writer has recently described the effect of these conditions on the early development of American literature:

The absence of a copyright law strengthened the yoke of foreign authority. Under the system then in vogue, American publishers could "pirate" at pleasure the works of English and European authors, that is, issue their books in the United States without asking their consent or paying

them any royalties. As a consequence, foreign novels, plays, poems, histories, and criticism were reproduced in numerous cheap editions, flooding the market with a literature that was alien both in matter and in spirit in many significant respects. Harpers, for instance, began to publish in 1842 a library of select novels and, when the number reached more than six hundred, only eight or ten even then were the work of American authors.

American magazines, following the same practice, filched from their foreign contemporaries reviews, articles, and criticisms without paying a penny for their copy. What was the use of remunerating an American writer for commenting on a book when a review by the best critic of the Old World could be had for the taking? <sup>1</sup>

The native author could not stand up against this competition. He was not to expect any return from the sale of his books; he must be grateful to have them published at all and to have a few complimentary copies thrown to him. Even Fenimore Cooper's publishers wrote to him, in 1834:

We wish to remark that we have been compelled to sell Books cheaper than we did formerly. When your early works were published English novels retailed for \$1.50 and American could be sold at \$2. Now the other (*sic*) retails at \$1, and the other at about \$1.50.

This last illustration is taken from Mr. Hervey Allen's admirable sketch of the subject in his life of Poe. Mr. Allen says also, elsewhere:

Other writers of the age avoided poverty by various expedients: Longfellow was a professor, Emerson was a minister, Holmes was a doctor, Hawthorne found refuge in a minor government employ that Poe tried to obtain in vain: Lowell escaped by several routes.

<sup>1</sup> C. A. and M. R. Beard, *Rise of American Civilisation*, i. 790.

But Poe, as Mr. Allen goes on to argue, was a writer and only a writer: it was not in him to be anything else. He was therefore exposed, every moment of his life, to all the influences that depressed native literature in the America of his time. He was, to be sure, an editor of unusual ability. His success with *Graham's Magazine*, the circulation of which was increased, under his guidance, from about 5000 copies to some 37,000, is enough to prove that. But he had not the requisite qualities to persist in competence even in this. His weaknesses and perhaps still more his fits of arrogance exasperated the possibly short-sighted proprietors who were making so much money in return for their small outlay on his salary. And it is hardly surprising that he never could obtain the financial support which might have enabled him to control a paper of his own. Periodical journalism was a highly speculative form of enterprise at the best and Poe's known failings made the element of speculation pretty well unthinkable.

As a writer of books, then, he was beaten out of the market by English authors. As a writer for the magazines, he was exposed to the same competition, which, though it did not completely crush him, reduced his earnings to a very meagre figure. Yet he was well known and even relatively popular in America. If he had lived in England in the 'thirties and 'forties, he would have been at least comfortably off. If he lived in America to-day, he might even be a wealthy man. Not unnaturally he concerned himself with the possibility of copyright reform but that was not accomplished for more than forty years after his death. He also turned longing eyes towards England as the country where an author might become rich, much as some

English authors now look towards America. Dickens at his request tried, but in vain, to place some of his work for him in England. In his last years, the success of *The Raven* brought him a few lecturing engagements which put a little money in his pocket, but he was never really free from anxiety and not often free from literal want.

The tragedy of Poe is more than can be explained in terms of money, but we must not leave money out of the reckoning when we attempt an explanation of it. From the moment when Mr. Allan threw him off (and indeed from before that moment) to the end of his life, he was miserably poor. He gave, and perhaps with justice, the lingering, heart-racking illness of his wife as an excuse for his drinking-bouts, but there can be no doubt that this cause of distraction was gravely aggravated by poverty. His means were not so small but that they sufficed him, with his weak head, to put the veil of intoxication between himself and the thought of how small they were.

He also knew his own genius and it maddened him to be poor, to live at best a life of shabby neatness, to be dependent on men who could not understand him and who patronised him when they did not snub him. He should have been a prince of literature and lived in a luxury comparable to that of one of his own heroes. There is a sorrowful significance in the fact that a publisher, seeking a title for an edition of his works, should have chosen, not the name of any place with which he was connected in real life, but the imaginary "Arnheim". His view of himself is disclosed in a letter dating from the last year of his life. He was then, it is true, in a condition of almost continuous delirium but it was such



as to produce, here at any rate, not mere ravings but the delivery of thoughts and feelings long kept secret. He writes to Mrs. Whitman:

Was I right, dearest Helen, in my first impression of you?—you know I have implicit faith in first impressions—was I right in the impression that you are ambitious? If so, and if you will have faith in me, I can and will satisfy your wildest desires. It would be a glorious triumph, Helen, for us—for you and me.

I dare not trust my scheme to a letter—nor have I time to hint at them here. When I see you I will explain all—as far as I dare explain all my hopes even to you.

Would it not be “glorious”, darling, to establish, in America, the sole unquestionable aristocracy—that of intellect—to secure its supremacy—to lead and to control it? All this I can do, Helen, and will—if you bid me—and aid me.

A month after the writing of this letter, its recipient was informed that Poe had been seen in a bar, “drinking wine”, and she consequently broke off their engagement. Less than a year later, he was dead in circumstances of almost inconceivable squalor.

The contrast between his ambitions and the field in which he sought to realise them is not too pleasant to contemplate. But if we do not force ourselves to realise it, we shall never escape from an attitude of bewilderment at so much genius combined with so many ineptitudes and especially at so much work which approaches the highest level but, not quite reaching it, remains broken and obscured. Poe had the natural gifts to justify his ambitions, but they were negated in part by moral and spiritual weaknesses, in part by place and time. So far, then, as the written word goes, he is no more than a fragment of a great author. But the ideal

completion of the fragment, dark and shadowy but not to be mistaken, like the old moon lying in the new moon's arms, was visible to many observers and powerfully moved their imagination.

## CHAPTER II

### EARLY YEARS, 1809-1831

EDGAR POE (his second name was of his own bestowing) was born at Boston on January 19th, 1809, in circumstances as unfortunate as could be imagined for a man of the character and gifts he was afterwards to display. On one occasion, and on one only, he subsequently referred to himself as "a Bostonian". But his connection with that city was due to the fact that his parents were members of a travelling theatrical company, which happened to be there when the time for Mrs. Poe's delivery arrived. She, unlike her second husband, had been bred to the stage, and she had made her first professional appearance at the age of nine. Her parents were Henry and Elizabeth Arnold, English players, and she was born in England in 1787, first reaching America in the company of her widowed mother in 1796. From then until her last illness she was absent from the stage only so long as was necessitated by her three confinements—and, even on these occasions, not so long as would have been desirable. Her first husband was C. D. Hopkins, the comedian of the company in which she was touring. She married him in 1802: he died in 1805 and, after a short interval, she married David Poe, another member of the company.

David was the son of a citizen of Baltimore, who, on the ground of his having been an army contractor during the War of Independence, was known as General Poe. He seems to have been prosperous at that time, and young David was studying law when, deluded by some successes in amateur theatricals, he decided to attempt the professional career. It was an ill-judged venture. After he had played his first speaking part, a critic who was evidently determined to be kind could say little better of him than that his talent might disclose itself when he had overcome his excessive nervousness. Apparently he never did. He was a bad player, and it is possible that he was also a bad husband. What became of him in the end remains to this day unknown, and, so far as the evidence goes, he may still be alive. Poe spoke of his death but what Poe said on this, or on any other detail of his life or his family, is most emphatically not evidence: he would say anything as the need or the whim of the moment directed. F. W. Thomas tells us that "I was told by a lawyer intimate with the family that his father had deserted his mother in New York". It is certainly in New York that we find the last trace of him, and there is no trustworthy record of his death.

The point is not of importance, except in two incidental ways. David was not likely, alive or dead, to have been of much service to his wife and children. He seems to have been a feckless and insignificant young man, probably of a tubercular diathesis. The very fact that the time and manner of his death are unknown suggests that he was a person of very small consequence. But this trivial mystery is characteristic of the clouds which obscure, more or less completely, so many of the

events of Poe's life. It typifies those circumstances which, by their doubtfulness and their suggestion of one sort or another of ignominy, made him at once more distrustful of himself and more arrogant with the rest of the world than he might otherwise have been. It typifies also the difficulties, largely caused by his own determination to put the best face on things, from which his biographers can never escape.

Elizabeth is a hardly less shadowy figure than David, but what we do know of her makes her seem a little more attractive. She was both versatile and indefatigable in her profession, though she never attained a high rank in it. She played every kind of part, but her portrait suggests that she must have been most at home in that of the singing chambermaid. Her face is reminiscent of Greuze's young women: she was small, lively and dainty, and it is conceivable that she may have been able to please an audience without any great degree of histrionic ability. She too was tubercular, and of this disease she died, at Richmond, Va., on December 8th, 1811, leaving two out of her three young children to be cared for by strangers. The eldest of the three, who was taken in by his grandfather, the General, is described by Thomas as being "feeble": he was given in later life to reciting at private parties. Rosalie, the youngest, who was adopted by a Mrs. Mackenzie, was frankly what used to be called a "natural". Edgar might plausibly be argued to have been the unluckiest of the three.

The facts allow us but the narrowest range of speculation concerning the influence of heredity on Poe's career. His parents were both of excessively delicate constitution and so was he, but he was not, like them,

tubercular. It has been inferred, from the fact that a relative once spoke of alcoholic liquors as "the great foe to our family", that his father was given to drink, and this may well have been so, but the reference is not enough to establish it. The one definite thing which we can assert about Poe's father and mother is that they had both disappeared before he reached his third birthday, leaving not a financial wrack behind, and that what was remembered of them was of a nature easily brought to mind whenever he made the smallest boyish or youthful slip. He knew that and it would perhaps not be too much to say that the chief legacy from them to him which we can certainly identify was a sort of uneasy self-consciousness.

It might have been better for him in the long run if he had been adopted by someone of his mother's kind, but his fate was very different. The dying Mrs. Poe had awakened the interest of some of the charitable ladies of Richmond and one of these, the wife of a more or less prosperous merchant named Allan, took Edgar under her protection on the day after his mother's death. No doubt the fact that John and Frances Allan jointly were childless (though John himself singly was not) had much to do with this arrangement. The child was something in the nature of a consoling gift from a not wholly ungenerous husband.

On one's general view of John Allan's character depends one's reading of that important section of Poe's life which begins here and ends in 1831, with his expulsion from West Point, when he was finally left to his own resources. The tangled tale, so far as it can be made out, presents the appearance of a novel of a certain familiar type. We have the sensitive child, already

giving promise of genius, a father too coarse, brutal and narrow to understand him, and the tender mother who softens the contacts between the two but falls ill and dies when she is most needed to perform that office. This is, indeed, not an unfair account of the situation, except that it omits one vital complication. Poe had not the smallest claim by blood on either of the Allans, a fact which he was too ready to forget and on which in moments of crisis Allan was inclined to lay more stress than would have been possible to a man of wider and more generous mind.

Poe's adopted father was not, by the usual human standards, a very bad man. He was indeed one whose main characteristic, in vice and in virtue alike, was ordinariness. In his business career, he was neither very successful nor very unsuccessful. Not doing too well in Richmond, he went to England in 1815, and, not doing too well there either, in 1820 he returned to Richmond. He was not wealthy until five years later when he benefited under the will of an uncle. But he was not too poor or too hard-hearted to indulge his wife's mixture of charitable and maternal feelings, and, if he ever later complained of this extra, unnecessary mouth in the household, we hear nothing of it. The very strong probability is that he would never so have complained. It would have injured his pride if anyone had had reason to think he could not support the burden he had undertaken: it might even have injured his commercial standing. But he retained a strict, if very narrow, sense of what was due from him to Poe and from Poe to him. Within these limits, and not more grudgingly than is sometimes observable in fathers according to the flesh, for a long time he fulfilled his obligations. But he had

one weapon in reserve which is denied to fathers according to the flesh. When he felt himself at breaking-point, he could say, "You are none of mine: I have maintained and educated you until now you are of an age to care for yourself: I will do no more". If the domestic unhappiness arising out of his wife's failing health and his own quite commonplace sinfulness had not been complicated by Poe's extraordinary character and uncertain relation to him, breaking-point might never have been reached. When it was reached, this was, in effect, what he said, and Poe never found the proper answer to it, though it would not have been likely to have had any effect on Allan if he had.

Poe's contention was, in essence, that he had been brought up to expect a certain place in the world and that it was unfair to deprive him of it. This was just, up to a point, though it may be observed that one of his grievances was that Allan had left him in an ambiguous position by never formally adopting him as son and heir. This might, one would have thought, have suggested to him that his expectations ought not to be too confident. But in any case he should have argued more subtly. He should have said to John Allan, "If you and your wife had not interfered, my mother's colleagues would not have allowed me to die: they would have somehow incorporated me in their wandering and rather disreputable existence. I might, I probably should, have been unhappy, but it would have been in a life I could have thought of as my own. You have undertaken, and can never rid yourself of the responsibility of removing me from that life to another. I am not, I confess, suited to your mode of life, but you cannot be sure that a son of your own body would have been better



suited to it. I can tell you (since you probably do not know the story) of a Sussex squire named Timothy Shelley, whose son caused him far more anxiety than I have ever caused you. When such freaks occur, no one is to blame and both parties must do the best they can, each recognising that he has some responsibility to, and for, the other. But here the whole responsibility is yours. You should not, in short, have assumed the relation of father towards a stranger unless you were prepared to show him even more than the forgiving affection which is expected of a true father. You show me less, because you believe that you have put me in your debt. What you have done is to promote civil war within me—war between the standards my upbringing has imprinted on my mind and those which my blood, however much I repress it, continually asserts. Owing to this conflict, I do not think I shall ever be happy, even if you help me: if you do not, I cannot tell what may become of me.”

Allan could never have understood such an argument even if Poe had ever been in a sufficiently dispassionate frame of mind to formulate it. He had that strict sense of value for money which, however unimaginatively it may be used, enables a man to do well in business, more especially in a developing community where business is plentiful. He was not entirely unimaginative, as is proved by one terrible sentence in which he sums up his final conclusions upon his adopted son: “His Talents are of an order that can never prove a comfort to their possessor”. That is an amazingly accurate prophecy of all that was to follow. But if he could perceive the existence of things outside his range, he could not compass the thought that they might be

admirable things. His tone here is as if he were to say, "Mr. So-and-so has a beautiful house, but I fear that it will prove beyond his means and will bring him to disaster". Nothing is more obvious than that Mr. So-and-so ought to get rid of his house, and no doubt Allan thought that Poe's retention of his "Talents" was of a piece with the rest of his obstinate folly. And part of Poe's tragedy lies in the fact that he was often more than half inclined to agree with Allan. He never took an adventurous delight in living from hand to mouth, he never even grew enured to it: throughout his life, he felt that peace, prosperity and respectability were waiting for him just round the corner. To the very end he dreamt of a coming time when he would be able to pay his bills punctually and in full, just as his adopted father had always done.

At first, of course, and for several years there was no conflict severe enough to leave a trace which biography could take seriously. It would be possible to fill many pages with defensible surmises as to the day-to-day conditions of life in the Allan household. We should have Edgar, a gay, good-looking and wilful child, who was always loved by Frances and who was more often than not relished by John, as a high-spirited puppy might be relished. We should also have John, oppressed sometimes by the vicissitudes of his business and sometimes, perhaps, by the consciousness of his infidelities, and, on these occasions, inclined to see Edgar's high spirits in the light of naughtiness, directly attributable to his graceless ancestry. Then he would remember that the child was dependent on his charity, and he would renew his mental reservations with regard to the future. Such a reconstruction should be left to

the novelist, but we must have a picture something like this in our minds if we are to make any sense of these early years and of what followed. At any rate, there can be no doubt that Allan often felt pleased enough with his protégé. He wrote from England in 1818, to the boy's former schoolmaster, "Edgar is a fine Boy and I have no reason to complain of his progress".

The precise importance of Poe's sojourn in England is difficult to estimate. It was long enough, at that age, to make him think of England as his home and to make the return, when he was eleven, a more serious uprooting than the journey thither, when he was only six. But whether it provided him with any great store of definite impressions is another matter. The description of school-life in *William Wilson* may be referred without much hesitation to his memories of "Dr." Bransby's school at Stoke Newington, but the scene is not very accurately reproduced. He writes of "the deep, hollow note of the church-bell, breaking, each hour, with sudden and sullen roar, upon the stillness of the dusky atmosphere in which the *fretted Gothic steeple* lay imbedded and asleep". Now the parish church of Stoke Newington had a cupola, not a steeple, until several years after Poe had left England. This is, to be sure, on the face of it a very trivial point, but it has its significance. Precise recollection of the thing seen had but little place in Poe's method. The settings of his stories, good or bad, vivid or vague, were but so much dramatic *décor* for the action and the emotions, and the alien colour which he introduced so richly into his work came from reading and dreaming, not from his experience. His story *The Assiguation* gives as good a picture of Venice as *William Wilson* does of a village outside

London. The actual effects of the English years probably lay deeper, in a general unsettlement of mind: they cannot be traced in the details of his work.

The story of the next few years is more easily read. Mr. Allan's financial embarrassments increased to such an extent that the mere fact of his not having been entirely submerged shows him to have been regarded as essentially sound. His anxious position, with its necessary effect on nerves and temper, would not tend to make more comfortable the relations between him and Poe, who was now, according to later report, beginning to be a leader in every sort of schoolboy adventure. I do not, I confess, attach much importance to these later reports. They may contain some truth: it is certain that the light of retrospect lies golden upon them. Poe did not in after-years show much sign of leadership in his relations with other men or much sign of physical prowess or enterprise. It is possible, indeed, and it would not be inconsistent with what we know of his character, that he had much more initiative and self-confidence when he thought his position in life secure than during his later precarious existence. However this may be, the main incidents of this period can all be looked at in one revealing light. The first of them is the story of his having swum six miles "in a hot June sun, against one of the strongest tides ever known in the river". He resented any comparison between this feat and Byron's swim across the Hellespont. Most of his companions in those days, he said, could have done what Byron did: as for himself, he was ready to swim from Dover to Calais. But, though it seems to be impossible to fix the date of the exploit, and, for me, to determine its worth, I suspect it to have occurred in

June 1824 and to have been not unconnected with Byron's death earlier in that year and the consequent revival of all the old legends about him.

Poe, in other words, now suffered that not uncommon experience of boys of impressionable talent: he wanted to be like, but also, if possible, to surpass, a certain person whose acknowledged genius had peculiarly appealed to him. He wanted to be like Byron, and the misunderstanding of his own powers which is involved in the idea is as typical as the idea itself. At this time he began to write verse, poems addressed, in Mr. Hervey Allen's phrase, "to a whole townful of young ladies". Not all of these compositions have survived, but such as still remain to us bear out my hypothesis of the Byronic influence and are evidence as strong in its favour as the famous swim itself. Some of them are even as bad as Byron's worst. But all through them, even where, as in *Tamerlane* and *Al Aaraaf*, the author's own natural genius warps his imitative intent, the influence is plainly discernible.

There began now also another habit of the greatest consequence. Mrs. Jane Stith Stanard, the mother of a young schoolfellow, was the first of those women to whom in turn Poe looked for the inspiring, and perhaps even more for the comforting, love which he felt that he required. Unsympathetic people say that he met her only once, but, whether this be true or not, it is known that he mourned her immoderately when, not long after, she died, and that for the rest of his life, under the name of "Helen", she took a sort of legendary place in his imagination. It is to be remarked (though his biographers do not remark it) that Mrs. Allan never did. Of Poe's affection for, and loyalty to, the woman

who had adopted him and cared for him there can be no possible doubt. But it seems likely that, though she was infinitely more sympathetic and loving to him than her husband, she understood him very little better. She was now beginning to ail and Allan's treatment of her was beginning to be openly questionable. What is important in such situations is not so much definite incidents as the daily texture of life in the home, and here again we are left to mere conjecture. It is not impossible, however, to form a picture plausible enough to explain the known facts. Mrs. Allan is more and more concerned for Edgar, who is showing symptoms of wildness which will prejudice his "father" against him and which are such as she herself cannot approve. But, as her health fails her, she feels that she is losing her grip upon them both. In this she is perfectly justified, for Allan, a gross and sensual man, is unfaithful to his sickly wife—and grows even more morose and uncertain-tempered under the strain of a genuine sense of guilt and an even more urgent fear of scandal. There is a strong probability that he will marry again before he has long been a widower. Edgar's sense of loyalty towards his "mother" is intensified when he considers the adulterous Allan's intolerant attitude towards his own relatively harmless misdeeds: he takes a part more active than prudent, and probably equally displeasing to both the parties, in such disputes as occur between John and Frances Allan.

We need not attempt to fix the point at which Allan began to consider the boy more of a nuisance than he could be expected to put up with. It is said that he took kindly enough to his versifying to consider putting down good money to have the results published. But in 1824

we find the first definite evidence that Poe was getting on his nerves. In November of that year, he wrote to the elder brother in terms expressive of deep dissatisfaction: "The boy professes not a spark of affection for us, not a particle of affection for all my care and kindness towards him". In another letter there occurs the ominous phrase, "a complete absence of any sense of gratitude", which evidently foreshadows the end.

There came yet another factor to complicate the situation. Poe, as was only to be expected, fell in love. The object of his choice was Sarah Elmira Royster, the fifteen-year-old daughter of a neighbour. The attachment, not to be taken seriously in the ordinary way, was a different matter where a boy already showing signs of so much headstrong romanticism was concerned. Apparently Mr. Royster was alarmed, and Allan must have felt that the question of his relationship to, and his responsibility for, Edgar was on the point of being raised in an acute shape. If Edgar and Elmira were to be engaged—and they considered themselves to be—then Mr. Royster would want to know what Edgar's prospects were, and Allan at this point really had not made up his mind. It is not impossible that, as his wife's health continued to give way, he may have begun to entertain hopes that after all he might yet have a legitimate heir of his own body—hopes which were afterwards realised. He would therefore be especially unwilling to commit himself to his adopted son at this particular moment.

Here are two motives, neither very creditable to Allan, for what was apparently a change in his intentions with regard to the boy. Hitherto he had probably meant—indeed it is most likely that nothing else had

ever occurred to him—to take him into the firm of Ellis and Allan. But now there were two reasons for getting him out of Richmond. There were domestic unhappinesses of which the boy knew too much and in which he was too much inclined to take Mrs. Allan's part. There were amatory tendencies in him which might at any moment force Allan to show his hand before he was ready. But it would be unjust, I think, to assume that he sent Poe to the University of Virginia merely as the first step towards getting rid of him. We must not forget that it was not until 1825 that he became a rich man by reason of the legacy from his uncle, William Galt. That stroke of good fortune made it possible for him to extend Poe's education with a view to starting him in some respectable profession. This would be much better than having him in the business and in this way the responsibility would be finally and painlessly discharged. Poe would then have received an adequate start in life, which was all, and perhaps a little more than all, that he had any right to expect.

But the inevitable quarrel between the two was now fast approaching and at this point for the first time Allan showed himself, in a concrete manner, unfair. The University was highly disorderly in its opening years, and what Poe needed was judicious discipline rather than incitement to riot. What incitement to irregular conduct he did not receive from his companions was amply supplied by Allan—who supplied next to nothing of anything else. That is to say, he kept Poe, then aged seventeen, scandalously short of money, short even of the sum required for bare necessities. It is small wonder that the boy, pressed, embarrassed and (very likely) hungry, took to gambling in the hope of



providing himself with money, as older and wiser men have done before and since. His debts on this account came eventually to a considerable sum, large enough to work Allan up into a rage in which he heaped "debts of honour" and the rest all together and refused to pay any of them. I do not, however, see in this any ground for supposing that he had already determined to rid himself of the incubus in his house. Boys quarrel with their natural fathers most easily at this age and for these reasons. Allan was, in business matters, a dour and precise man who had struggled all his life to keep on the better side of insolvency. He may too have been one of those men who find it more endurable to keep a son kicking his heels and eating his head off at home than to give him the smallest sum in ready money. But the relation here was not between son and father but between two beings whose connection had at any rate originated in a charitable action on the part of the elder.

In this crisis, Allan remembered that his son Edgar was not his son but a dependent especially obliged to show docility towards him. It was the way he was made, and, God help him! he could no other. Poe too was as God had made him. He returned from the University for the Christmas of 1826. The atmosphere in his home was no better than it had been and Miss Royster had been taken away from Richmond. In March 1827, after a quarrel, of which, in spite of all surmises, we know little, he left Allan's house. He left, it seems, in a high storm of passion, and then wrote from a tavern in Richmond asking for his clothes, his books and enough money to take him to Boston and to keep him for a month after his arrival. Allan's reply

was characteristic: Poe, he said, declared his independence and then asked for money. None was sent.

The oddest thing that emerges from this episode is that Allan is the most comprehensible, if not the most likeable, figure in it. Mrs. Allan, already enfeebled by her last illness, hardly appears except by inference. As Mr. Hervey Allen points out, since Poe had no money of his own, Mrs. Allan, or her sister, Miss Valentine, must have kept him supplied during the next few weeks. We can gather much less of Poe's mind than of Allan's from the letters exchanged between them. The most natural conclusion is that this crisis arose in bluff on both sides, but that Allan was not dissatisfied to have matters turn out as they did. Poe, when he was not asked to return, was left in mid-air: Allan could with a clear conscience wash his hands of the ungovernable young man who had once been a divertingly high-spirited puppy about the house.

One can hardly say of them, in Meredith's lines, that

These were two rapid falcons in a snare,  
Condemned to do the fitting of the bat.

Poe was a falcon, but Allan was a bat of the sturdy, strong-winged type. They were, however, indubitably in a snare, created by Mrs. Allan's charitable impulse, out of which the falcon came injured for life and the bat vastly upset, distressed and puzzled. Allan can fairly be accused of hardness, coarseness and hypocrisy, but it can also be asserted that, up to a point, within the limitations of his nature, he did his best and that he honestly considered that the ingratitude with which he had met was so excessive as to have relieved him of his obligations. His real crime was one that he could never

have understood: it consisted in his assuming responsibility for a creature he could not love. It is not right to take a human soul into one's house as one takes a puppy: it is not right to give what calls for gratitude unless love goes with the gift. Allan did morally make a promise of generosity which he betrayed when he starved Poe at the University and when he took a boy of just nineteen at his foolish word and left him to the independence he had claimed. For, though Poe hardly realised it, Allan was now done with him and never recognised any further claim except with the rather unctuous reservation that "every man is my care, if he be in distress".

This, with which any novelist who knew his business would close the first period of Poe's life, moves on to a curious and protracted anti-climax. What follows provides an admirable example of the problems that Poe sets his biographers. What did he do between his quarrel with Allan and the partial reconciliation that preceded his entry into West Point in 1830? The earlier narrators of his life took his own word for it, having nothing better to take. Ingram says:

Unless the poet's most solemn word is to be doubted, he departed for Europe; and it is generally supposed, and by Poe was never contradicted, in order to offer his services to the Greeks against their Turkish tyrants.

There is, to be sure, some reserve in this statement and Ingram shows even more in continuing the story according to Poe. This includes several romantic incidents, a duel in France, a scrape in St. Petersburg, and so forth. Mr. Whitty, for some reason that escapes me, is anxious to prove that there is at least a grain of truth

in this yarn: he shows that, during the months unaccounted for, Poe might just have reached England and come straight back again. That he might have done so cannot be disputed, but if, as we must, we reject the greater part of his statement, there is no particular reason for retaining any of it. It might at most show that he had a later experience of the sea which was useful in writing *Arthur Gordon Pym*—but in reality that book needs no more explanation than is afforded by the recollections of childhood. What we do know is that he somehow reached Boston, found time there to arrange the publication of his first volume of poems and, on May 26th, 1827, enlisted in the United States Army under the name of "Edgar A. Perry", whence he was not discharged until April 4th, 1829. The book was *Tamerlane and Other Poems*, by "A Bostonian". Only four copies are known and Mr. Milton Waldman advances good reasons for thinking that it was never put into effective circulation.<sup>1</sup>

The ungenerous but almost irresistible interpretation of the available evidence is that Poe, when he entered West Point, did not wish it to be known that he had served in the ranks. He therefore concocted his fantastic European story to account for the period of his service. He need not, perhaps, have made it so fantastic. But he was not the man, once he had started lying, to make a colourless job of it. It is a little hard to see why he should have been ashamed of this episode, for hardly at any other time in his life did his conduct do him so much credit. He actually (grotesque as it may seem) became regimental sergeant-major, while not yet twenty, and there seems to be no record of his

<sup>1</sup> *Americana*, 251-2.

having ever contravened the regulations or earned the bad opinion of his officers. If at any time he had wished to prove that he could lead an orderly life when circumstances were not against him, there was his army service for him to point to. But, having decided that it must be forgotten and being a whole-hearted romancer, he produced a story that afterwards seemed too good to be abandoned. It is, indeed, almost cruel to speak of him as lying. His desire to see himself in a picturesque light was so strong as to make his grasp of reality exceedingly weak. Whenever his fancy suggested a rearrangement of the truth, there was in him no power of resistance to the temptation. Thus, when the time came for his discharge from the army, he quite delightfully informed his commanding officer that he was "one of a family of orphans whose unfortunate parents were the victims of the conflagration of the Richmond Theatre in 1809". Every man who deals in fiction is in a greater or lesser degree exposed to this temptation: he feels that the world is full of events which have not happened quite as they should have done. Poe's mind was phantasmatic: he confused fancy and fact, and his yielding was almost in the nature of a reflex action.

Most of his time in the army was spent in garrison duty at Fort Moultrie on Sullivan's Island, off the coast of South Carolina, amid scenery, as Mr. Hervey Allen points out, different from any he had ever seen before. It certainly supplied the setting for *The Gold Bug*, but, as I have said already, the influence of material surroundings is not generally easily traced in Poe's work. The life there was probably uneventful and probably not very strenuous even in a humdrum way. But events were taking place in Virginia. Miss Royster had

married a Mr. Shelton, and Frances Allan was dying and was asking to see Poe. Her husband, however, who had been in communication with him and with his company officer for some time in an entirely negative way, did not wish to have a closed chapter reopened by the prodigal's return, for whatever reason it might be, and postponed sending for him until it was too late. When Poe arrived in Richmond, Frances had been dead for two days and was already buried. But what Allan had probably foreseen, and dreaded, happened none the less. He could not refuse some sort of reconciliation and a renewed, if limited, measure of assistance. Poe's record had been good for nearly two years. He seemed to have shown some capacity for a military career and all he asked was to be helped in prosecuting it. Allan, reluctantly and with misgivings, undertook to help him through West Point.

The rest of the story can be briefly told. The reconciliation was by no means so complete as Poe supposed it to have been. Allan's letter of recommendation to the Secretary of War could hardly have been colder, and its coldness may have had something to do with the fact that the affair of Poe's entry into West Point dragged on for over a year after his discharge from the army. During a greater part of this time he lived in Baltimore, where he formed a connection no less important and much happier than his connection with the Allans: he entered the household of his aunt, Mrs. Maria Clemm. During this period (after unavailing efforts to persuade Allan to help him with it) he published his second book. This really *was* published, and brought him into some notice. But he was still kept desperately short of money and in 1830 he returned to kick his heels

once more at Richmond. It was probably the wisest thing he could have done, for his presence irritated Allan and stimulated him to get Poe's appointment as a cadet made at last.

On July 1st Poe entered West Point, only to be hampered again by Allan's peculiar views about money. His cadet's pay was far from enough for him to live on, and Allan's sole contribution seems to have been the sum of twenty dollars. The position was from the beginning intolerable, and what at the University had driven him to gambling now drove him for the first time to drink. What last chances there might have been (probably none) of yet another patching-up were ruined by two incidents. One was Allan's second marriage. The other was an amazing and rather discreditable action on the part of Poe. After his discharge from the army, he had been pursued by a former comrade who desired the return of monies lent and, to explain his inability to obtain the necessary sum, he stated in a letter that "Mr. Allan was not very often sober". The creditor at last grew impatient and forwarded this letter to Allan, who discharged the debt but was, not unjustifiably, indignant and seized the opportunity of casting Poe off for good and all. The cadet thereupon proceeded to have himself dismissed from West Point by the simple means of deliberately breaking every frangible regulation. The process was accomplished by the end of January 1831.

He came into distant contact with Allan three times again. In that same year, he appealed in a grovelling manner to be saved from imprisonment for debt and the money was sent, though not until after he had been rescued by some other agency. In the next, probably

again driven by desperation, he paid a flying visit to Richmond and had an altercation with the second Mrs. Allan. It would be reasonable to assume that he was drunk at the time or crazed by the aftermath of drink, except that we have good grounds for thinking that at this period he was conducting himself very soberly. He cannot seriously have supposed that he had any rights in that house which would be admitted. He left without seeing Allan and afterwards said, with a pathetic endeavour to hide the squalor of the whole affair, that he had sacrificed a large fortune rather than put up with a trifling affront. Still later, in February 1834, he returned to Richmond and forced himself into Allan's sick-room, with what hopes or intentions we can only guess. Allan drove him out before any conversation had passed between them.

All these events are confused by the fact that Louisa Allan put forth her own versions of them, versions distorted by her not unnatural bias and by the fact that they were based primarily on what her husband thought it safe for her to know. The important point is that the real rupture took place in 1826. After that there was no chance of Poe being again received on anything like the old terms, and all the negotiations served only to delay the moment when he should be left somehow to support himself by the only talent he possessed. Allan died in March 1834 of a dropsical affection which he had richly earned and Poe was not mentioned in his will.



## CHAPTER III

### JOURNALIST AND FAMILY MAN, 1831-1847

EVEN in the army, where he otherwise conducted himself with so much regularity, Poe contrived to get into debt, and this was to be his normal condition for the rest of his life. Allan's treatment of him at the University of Virginia was probably not an isolated occurrence: the adoptive father was generous in principle but found the disbursal of a specific sum of hard cash a severe trial. Poe was thus given the worst possible training in the handling of money: he was positively driven to obtaining credit, and he grew accustomed to the idea that, when the inevitable crisis matured, there were resources to fall back on, however unpleasant the process of invoking them might be. He seems not to have realised, for some time after his expulsion from West Point, that now nothing more would be forthcoming from Allan, no matter how desperate the position. But so it was, and from this time on one of the three determining factors in his life is poverty of that most humiliating and crippling sort which means privation complicated by creditors. The second is the effect produced on him by drink and, probably, drugs. The third is his relationship with the two Clemms, his wife and her mother.

It would not be possible in a short space to give a detailed account of Poe's life during these years, with the removals of the household hither and thither in search of fortune, the projects that never came to anything, the losses, the loans, the drinking-bouts, the illnesses, the dismissals, the quarrels. But every important fact henceforward falls into place under the head of one or another of these three factors. The first two formed a sort of vicious circle. The poorer Poe was, the more incitement he had to find forgetfulness of his miseries. The consequences of his doing so wasted his time and strength, brought him into disrepute, and made him poorer than ever. This process could have but one end and it was only delayed by the operation of the third factor.

In considering this, we must be clear from the beginning about its precise effect. Poe was upheld not only by Mrs. Clemm's love and care of him, but also by the sense of responsibility which she and her daughter, by their mere presence in his household, inspired. No one, indeed, was ever less like the vagabond and irresponsible poet of legend. He was always thoroughly ashamed of his weaknesses and never, in finding excuses for them, alleged the necessity of his genius. He was no Verlaine. He might have been a happier man, possibly even more productive and longer-lived, if he had possessed some of Verlaine's power of disavowing personal responsibilities. He had in him on the contrary a strong soul of regularity, which material circumstances and peculiarities both physical and temperamental combined to mask and to deform, but which they could never quite destroy. His portraits are unmistakeably those of a man who is grave, sober and thoughtful, who

has no levity in his soul, indeed, little if any sense of humour and but little disposition to spontaneous gaiety. There was weakness in his character, but it would not be unjust to say that he drifted, since he was always substantially out of the course he designed to steer. The injustice which is commonly done him, almost as much by his apologists as by his accusers, consists in a failure to recognise that he did endeavour to steer a certain course and did put an enormous amount of energy into the attempt.

He began his new life with a handicap. He had twice been started in a career under such conditions as made success impossible but did not prevent failure from discrediting him and impairing his self-confidence. The gradual realisation that Allan did not mean well by him but was, rather, resolute in injustice inspired him with a frightened and sickened distrust of all the world. It was thus that he set out to make a living by the problematical power of his pen. He had already succeeded in getting three books printed, which, in itself, considering the circumstances, was a pretty considerable feat. The first seems, as we have seen, to have been stillborn. The second had a good preliminary puff, ingeniously arranged by its author, and at least one unfavourable notice. The third had at least one favourable notice but in what paper we do not know. This third, incidentally, was largely supported by Poe's friends at West Point, who must have been a little surprised by what their subscriptions brought them. These achievements were well enough but they promised nothing, one way or the other, regarding a career in practical journalism. The conditions were, as has been said, bad for anyone and it is unlikely that Poe's

books were of much service to him at the outset: they cannot be said to have created for him any useful reputation. How he lived during the two months he spent in New York after leaving West Point is still mysterious. At one moment he formed the project of obtaining a commission in the Polish army, Poland being then in revolt against Russia. But it came to nothing. The rebellion was suppressed, and the French Foreign Legion, which was first recruited about this time, seems not to have occurred to him. Here ended his military ambitions: he was, and now finally, thrown back upon literature for a career, an event which he would have welcomed if only literature had more heartily offered him one. The most acceptable surmise is that he existed on small loans of the sort which neither borrower nor lender ever thinks of as to be repaid. At the end of March, he went to Baltimore and quartered himself on Mrs. Clemm.

The distinguishing trait in Mrs. Clemm's character was a bent for looking after other people, and her household already included Poe's bed-ridden grandmother, and his tubercular and alcoholic elder brother. The grandmother may have brought a little grist to the mill: she had some sort of pension in recognition of her husband's services in the War of Independence. Henry Poe did not: he was ailing by this time, and he died in August. Nor, so far as it is possible to see, did Edgar. He may of course have done work for newspapers which cannot now be traced. He probably did, but the first production of his which we definitely know to have been published in any periodical is *Metzengerstein* which was accepted by the *Philadelphia Saturday Courier* in 1832. Up to then and indeed for some time later, Mrs. Clemm's

shoulders bore the main burden. She seems to have been in many households one of those humble, unobtrusive familiars who come with an empty bag and take it away full. She had in her an instinct of protectiveness which neither she nor anyone else could restrain. She accepted burdens without question as they presented themselves to her, and, as unquestioningly, she assumed that those who could would help her to bear them. Generally speaking, the assumption worked well.

It is necessary to remember, however, that Poe, when he arrived in Baltimore, would not appear in her eyes as either the wastrel Allan thought him or the foredoomed creature we now know him to have been. He, more than any other member of the family, had had advantages and had shown talent. He had been in various sorts of trouble, to be sure, but he was a young man and most of his lapses were properly to be attributed to the man who should have acted as his father. Mrs. Clemm, whose optimism was an ever-flowing fountain, may well have seen in him a future prop of her amazing establishment. Her own son was unsatisfactory: he drank and eventually went to sea. Edgar, with his education, his acknowledged gifts, his gentlemanly manner and his serious disposition, must have appeared almost to condescend to her straitened and precarious hospitality and to bring with him a promise of brilliant things. Each lent the other self-confidence. Mrs. Clemm felt that now there was another responsible adult besides herself in the household: he felt that at last he had discovered a person to give him that stable affection through which alone he could maintain his grip on ordinary life.

I am not desirous of reckless adventure into those

wide territories of supposition bordering the narrow ribbon of what we really do know about Poe. But there is one imaginary picture which presents itself too vividly for any escape. Old Mrs. Poe, Henry and Virginia, the two invalids and the child, have been safely tucked up for the night. Mrs. Clemm, having finished her long day's work, finds Edgar reading. He puts aside his book as soon as he sees her and courteously bids her rest a little and talk to him. They talk about their family difficulties. She makes her own suggestions and he either states reassuring reasons for agreeing with her or else very gently puts another point of view. With restraint, and with subtlety enough for Mrs. Clemm, he hints at the greatness of his ambitions and at the likelihood of their fulfilment. At last she says that it is very late and she must go to bed, but she has been much comforted by her nice talk with him. And so she has—and so has he. Nothing, it is true, has been settled, but Mrs. Clemm feels that she has a new ally in her constant war against misfortune, a supporter all the more comforting because his obvious gifts are a little outside her range. He feels that he is now a person of consequence, looked up to for counsel and assistance: he begins to dramatise himself as the responsible family man and so gets a little adventitious but useful stiffening for his backbone. Mrs. Clemm goes to bed. Edgar reads a little more, dreams still longer and then himself goes to bed. In such moments he finds at least momentary comfort and ease, so that the tortured fibres of his mind can rest from their constant strain.

I must apologise for this violent divagation into the methods of fiction, but something of the sort is necessary if we are to understand the real meaning of this

strange and eventful connection. Whether, in prolonging his life for several more years than could otherwise have been expected, Mrs. Clemm did Poe any real service is a question I do not feel obliged to discuss here. The service she thus did the world is in effect the subject of this book.

At first his contribution to the partnership was little more than the hope with which he inspired Mrs. Clemm. But if he was not at this time, so far as we know, earning anything, he was at least working and seeking work for which he might be paid. The martial career definitely behind him, he turned, unsuccessfully, to thoughts of schoolmastering and, meanwhile, he wrote short stories. Five of these appeared in the *Philadelphia Saturday Courier* in the course of 1832 but it was not until the following year that they really brought him into notice. The *Baltimore Saturday Visitor* offered a prize of fifty dollars for a story and another of twenty-five dollars for a poem. Poe forthwith submitted not merely one story but an entire collection which he called *Tales of the Folio Club*. Out of this the judges, after inclining at one moment towards *A Descent into the Maelstrom*, chose the *MS. found in a Bottle* and awarded it the prize by acclamation, adding to their verdict a rider that the author ought to publish the whole volume, since it was, in their opinion, "eminently distinguished by a wild, vigorous and poetical imagination, a rich style, a fertile invention, and varied and curious learning". This was a turning-point in Poe's life and hereafter, no matter what his vicissitudes, there was no question of his standing as an author. The direct pecuniary reward was unimportant and he could as yet find no publisher for his collection of stories. But the indirect

results were invaluable to him. He had now a solid base of acceptance from which to advance in search of regular employment, and he had found, in John P. Kennedy, one of the judges of the competition, a useful benefactor. Kennedy, after helping him in various ways, recommended him to Thomas Wylkes White, the proprietor of the *Southern Literary Messenger*, which was published at Richmond, and, after contributing to it regularly for some time, Poe went to Richmond in 1835 to take a closer part in its direction. Now at last he had a salary, that long-desired corner-stone of a stable and responsible existence.

There can be no doubt that as a working journalist, leaving his literary powers out of the question, Poe displayed marked ability and got for himself too little of the fruits of it. More than one employer decided to do without him, but not one because he had shown himself incapable of doing what was required. The details of these enterprises are confused and are now intrinsically uninteresting: a dissection of Poe's editorial achievements would be here out of place. But it can be said that, as a magazine editor, he was born before his proper time and yet, in spite of that handicap, managed to prove what he had it in him to do. He was energetic, enterprising and unexpectedly canny, and his heart was in the work, since he realised what an immense power a vigorously conducted magazine might be made to wield over the American public. When he told Helen Whitman that, with her help, he could establish in America "the sole unquestionable aristocracy—that of intellect", the magazine was the instrument he had in mind. The thought of an organ of his own (first *The Penn* and then *The Stylus*—two of the most tantalising phantoms in all



literature) began to haunt him very early and stayed with him to the end.

He was, indeed, not far wrong in believing that its realisation would have made him a man of the first importance in America and, probably, in the world. But the obstacles which stood in his way were such as were no one's fault. Those created by the copyright law and the seismic condition of the American money-market during this period might conceivably have been overcome. But the most generous and enlightened patron would have shrunk from admitting Poe as an equal partner in any enterprise involving the outlay of large sums of money, and equal partnership was what he desired. A more enlightened and generous patron than he ever encountered would have seen that the best way of protecting him and getting the best out of him was to put him definitely beyond the anxieties of poverty. It could have been done, and at no very great cost, at any time after Mrs. Clemm and Virginia had joined him in Richmond. It would not, to be sure, have been an absolute safeguard, but it would have been an ameliorative measure with great possibilities of profit in it.

Not one of his three principal employers ever thought of what now seems to us to have been a fairly obvious remedy. White paid him ten dollars a week, although after his arrival in the office of the *Literary Messenger* the subscription list was multiplied by something like five. This was in part due to the fact that Poe freed White from editorial duties to give more time to the business side of the paper. But there must have been more in it than that, and a further-seeing man would have realised that it was worth while to foster so fruitful

a partnership between editor and business-manager, even if that meant a little pampering of the editor. Burton paid him the same, and Graham eight hundred dollars a year, with extras that cannot have amounted to much. *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine* prospered under his editorship, and *Graham's Lady's and Gentleman's Magazine* (in which *Burton's* was absorbed) prospered quite astonishingly, reaching a subscription of nearly forty thousand. These three, so far as can now be seen, were decent and kindly men, and were all inspired by a sort of affection, now tolerant, now exasperated, for Poe. Any one of them, by doubling Poe's emoluments, could probably have made him very much more than twice as efficient, without seriously depleting his own profits. Graham, according to Mr. Hervey Allen's estimate, made some fifteen thousand dollars net profit in the first year of his enterprise. The fact is that at this time the American magazine was passing through the stage of sheer exploitation. It was a Tom Tiddler's ground for men without special gifts or ambitions (Burton, for example, was an actor) who had capital to invest and would be content to snatch at such profits as could be obtained without foresight or constructive effort.

Apparently all three of these men thought of Poe in the same manner as the mistress of a house who says, "Smith is a treasure of a parlour-maid, but I cannot have a parlour-maid who drinks". A parlour-maid may be good at her work or she may be bad, but one who was a genius would not, for want of scope, stand out very significantly above her merely good colleagues. White, Burton and Graham all realised that Poe was a good editor and they also gave him disinterested support be-

cause they realised, however dimly, that he was in some mysterious way a genius. But they did not know that he was a genius as an editor, or, knowing it, they did not understand the difference that it made. He was to them a person employed to do certain work which he did very well—so long as he abstained from what they called “the bottle”. If he did not abstain, there were scores of others who could do the work well enough.

Poe’s weakness for “the bottle” is the shabbiest thing in a tragically shabby life. All evidence goes to show that he could not “hold his liquor like a gentleman”, that a glass or two of no matter what would turn his ordinary reserved and polite disposition into something very different. He was anything but an heroic drinker: he will never have a place among the classic tipplers for whom mankind, however foolishly, preserves a sort of reverence. He soon became silly under the influence of drink, and his silliness was more likely than not to take the form of vainglory or aggression. It did release certain dangerous repressions—and it released them in a dangerous manner. Mr. Poe all day long, working in his office or going between office and home, made an impression that suggested something behind his controlled countenance and manner. The combination of threadbareness and determined neatness in his dress was all of a piece with his courteous and reserved manner. Then at night, in a bar, he swallowed a small portion of liquor and began to boast. His boasting had something in it, but nothing in the least likely to be understood by the chance company of those moments. What can, to the generality of mankind, be more pitiable than the man who assumes an aristocratic attitude when sober and then, after a drink or two,

grows expansive in an accidental assembly of loafers? Or, if not expansive, quarrelsome. Poe, not robust of body and by natural fastidiousness disinclined from brawling, would very easily find causes of violent dispute or imagine that his honour had been affronted when once he had taken the little dose that could transform his whole personality.

There is nothing more pathetic or more revealing in the whole business than his own attitude towards his lapses. He confesses them and sometimes he seeks to explain them, but he never defends them. He was far from being in his own eyes a swashbuckler of life and poetry, fulfilling the requirements of his temperament in debauch and revelry. He was an unfortunate gentleman with a weakness which he meant to conquer, and his latest downfall was always going to be the last. "I feel in excellent spirits", he writes from New York to Mrs. Clemm, "and haven't drank a drop"—there is something inexpressibly touching in this childlike assurance and appeal for approval. But he was exposed to too many temptations. His formal courtesy (described by some as "hauteur") was the natural defence of a spirit gravely lacking in self-confidence. It is worth remarking how little male companionship he seems to have enjoyed after leaving West Point. He felt that he could make an impression on women and with them he was at his ease, but with men he was uncomfortable and oversensitive. There were never wanting men to take a more or less friendly interest in him, but he could not lose consciousness of himself in masculine society. He took refuge in a distant and defensive pose, or, desperately afraid of being thought inferior, made desperate, almost insane, attempts to prove his superiority. There

is an odd tale of a grocer whose acquaintance he made over the counter and on whom he used to call now and again for a chat: the grocer asked him his name and he replied, "Thaddeus Perley, at your service". This was one way of escape from his inhibition. Another was in the bar-room, where he could be with ordinary men, behaving just like an ordinary man himself and, every time he ordered his glass to be refilled, gaining in the very action self-confidence and ease of manner.

I have said that his drinking could have been moderated to the point of harmlessness by rescuing him from poverty, and I do not think that this argument conflicts with that. Money in his pocket, freedom from insistent creditors, would have gone a long way towards giving him the self-confidence he sought from liquor, would have put him on an equality with the ordinary men about him, who, so mysteriously to him, were able either to pay their way or else to put a bold face on not doing so. But the want of male society and the difficulty of obtaining it without this perilous assistance were undoubtedly important factors in his deterioration. In later years he ascribed the whole of his weakness to the effect produced on him by Virginia's malady with its alternations between hope and terror. It had, however, adversely affected his prospects, even before his marriage, and long before his wife was first taken ill. He had not been long in Richmond before he quarrelled with White for reasons clearly shown in the subsequent letter of forgiveness and recall. This remarkable document is couched throughout in an affectionately admonitory tone. It begins with "Dear Edgar", it continues by saying that the only hope for Edgar is residence in a house "where liquor is not used", and it

reaches its peroration in the memorable pronouncement that "No man is safe who drinks before breakfast!"

When this breach occurred, Poe returned hastily to Baltimore, where, with no less haste and in much secrecy, he married his first cousin, Virginia Clemm. She was then thirteen years of age, and, on this account and, perhaps, on others, certain relatives had attempted to prevent the match. It is sometimes urged in explanation, and in defence of Poe, that she was not at that time over-young for a Southern bride. The answer to this is that the first ceremony was clandestine (some mystery envelops it still) and that at the second Virginia was unblushingly described as being "of the full age of twenty-one years". This lavish mendacity seems to indicate that Poe and Mrs. Clemm, both persons lacking in worldly wisdom, felt nervous about the step on which they had decided. They knew that they were doing something very much open to question and they were anxious to have it done without interference, so as to be able to present possible critics with an accomplished fact. All testimony goes to show that Virginia, so far from being in her early 'teens a full-blown Southern beauty, was under- rather than over-developed and that she remained, to some extent, mentally undeveloped to the end of her life. No word from any one of the three persons involved throws the smallest light on what was in their minds. The two ceremonies and the lie about Virginia's age are the chief material facts.

We have then to explain why Poe made apparently so extraordinary a match. To my mind that explanation is most convincing which least looks for extraordinary motives. Mr. Krutch will have it that he

suffered from some kind of impotence, whether bodily or spiritual, and therefore sought to put an obstacle between himself and the physical consummation of marriage. It is indeed probable that sex was never vigorous in him and that its force declined as he grew older. The character of much of his work suggests this conclusion and what we know, or guess, of his use of opium confirms it. But this factor would operate rather to make Virginia a possible than a specially suitable wife for him. The clearly veracious narrative of Mary Devereaux describes how, only three years earlier, Poe, being then in liquor, endeavoured to take her person by storm, and shows us that he was not exempt from normal urgencies. Years after, he paid a delirious visit to Mary, who by this time was also married, and asserted a claim on her. Drink in this, as in other matters, set him free to pursue ends which otherwise his self-distrust and distraction of purpose forbade to him. He was in love with Mary, and, both before and after Mary, with Elmira, in a more or less normal way, and I am inclined to surmise that it was not the physical side of marriage with a normal, adult woman from which he shrank but, so to speak, the housekeeping side. So much of his own mind, that worldly and practical part of the mind which grows tough with experience, never became fully adult, so that life with an adult partner would have been almost impossible for him and very painful for both of them. During his first brief return to Richmond as White's coadjutor he saw Elmira again and may very well have wondered, in spite of a return of the old longing, how she would have borne with him and his misfortunes. Mrs. Clemm and her daughter were much less likely to be disappointed in him or to

reproach him, and here he found an invaluable safeguard for his pride. The child-wife (and Virginia, though she lived to be twenty-six, was never anything else), with her simple affection and her competent industrious mother, gave Poe all he wanted, all, indeed, that he was capable of sustaining in the way of domestic base and background. Mrs. Clemm on her side equally desired a permanent arrangement and so, between the two of them, they settled that he should marry Virginia. What Virginia thought of it is not known: I am not aware that there is any information as to what Virginia thought about anything.

The history of Poe's family life during the next twelve years is simply one of struggle. During that time he held three positions each of which seemed to afford a foundation for prosperity—with White, with Burton and with Graham. He lost or abandoned each for the same combination of reasons, the irksomeness of subordination to men whom he considered his intellectual inferiors, the feeling that he was getting an insufficient share of the profits he created, the desire for a magazine of his own and—"the bottle". After his second parting with White in 1837, he removed to New York, an adventure the only thing about which that is not obscure is its failure. He retreated from it to Philadelphia in 1838, free-lancing again until Burton offered him a position on the *Gentleman's Magazine*. Again he proved an able editor and all this time his reputation as a writer was growing. *Arthur Gordon Pym*, which had appeared as a serial in White's paper, was published in book form in 1838, and *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, in two volumes, in 1839. But the ghost of that unborn child, *The Penn Magazine*,



rose to trouble him and he fell away from Burton with nothing tangible to fall back on. There ensued the usual interlude of casual and precarious work, eked out by the expedients of which Mrs. Clemm was a past-mistress.

At these times, in the endeavour to keep things going, he unquestionably, like Antony in the field, did eat strange flesh. The oddest and least creditable of his enterprises was, of all things, a text-book on conchology, the material for which was lifted from here and there, Poe's contribution being no more than the intermittently exercised art of paraphrase. He was himself so fond of accusing others of plagiarism that this incident was greeted with delight by his enemies and he suffered accordingly in reputation and temper. The thing was actually a trumpery piece of hackwork easily paralleled by scores of instances in the publishing of the times. He had, unfortunately, many enemies and, still more unfortunately, his weaknesses of both self-control and judgement were always opening to them wide joints in his armour. To us he may seem, as a critic, often to have erred in the direction of lenity rather than that of severity: he certainly gave high praise to some very shocking trash. But in his own time he was notorious for the savage tone of his criticism. Even his proprietors were moved from time to time to remonstrate with him on this account, though his reputation for ruthlessness had a good deal to do with the success of their magazines. To his contemporaries in literature he was exasperating for more than one reason: he not only wounded them, he also puzzled them. They too could be bitter enough on occasion, when, that is to say, they were pursuing some personal

feud. Poe's own feuds, indeed, went not uncelebrated by him, and he was not above a little flattery of authors whom, for whatever reason, he desired to please. But he was bewilderingly apt to treat as a personal enemy some complete stranger whose only offence was that he wrote badly or (and this was a very frequent reason) that he had been overpraised. He was, like many great critics, a very uncertain judge of specific works. He had to an almost excessive degree the journalist's talent for making a little learning go a very long way, and he was not exempt from a certain provinciality in time as when he declared that he regarded Tennyson "as the noblest poet that ever lived". But he did often overstep the provinciality in space with which so many of his American colleagues were afflicted and he refused to inflate American reputations out of patriotism or European reputations out of snobbery.

Of course, he made enemies: he could not set pen to paper, he could hardly take part in an ordinary conversation about literature without doing so. The pity was that he had not that strength of will which, from a worldly point of view, is so necessary if a man is to pursue a fearless path. It is no doubt a poor answer to the critic who has shown that your verses are a mass of insipidity enlivened by an occasional theft to say that he is often drunk and bilks his creditors for insignificant amounts. Nevertheless common human nature takes it as a sort of answer and often allows it to be materially injurious. If Poe's character had been firmer and better balanced, he might have been able to impose himself on all those who stood in his way, and on his successive proprietors as well as on his literary enemies. As it was, he laid himself open to attack in matters quite

irrelevant to the enmity he excited. The literary feuds of those days were conducted without ruth or scrupulousness. Thomas Dunne English replied to Poe's attack on him by declaring that Poe was a forger. This was, to be sure, overstepping the mark and Poe profited from his enemy's mistake by something in the way of damages. But there were other charges which could be, and were brought against him, which he could not take to the courts. All his life his warmest friends and helpers were never long without reason to shake their heads over him, or his enemies without opportunities for damaging him.

Thus there tended to be for him, after every failure, a narrower field in which to make a new beginning. Yet his employers were generous to him according to their lights. He addressed Burton after their parting in the tones of threadbare haughtiness which are so frequent and so distressing in his utterances: "Your attempts to bully me excite in my mind scarcely any other sentiment than mirth. When you address me again, preserve, if you can, the dignity of a gentleman." But the man, whom, even a year afterwards, Poe cheerfully described as "a buffoon and a felon", recommended him to the new proprietor when he sold the *Gentleman's Magazine*. Graham acted on the recommendation, with results, as we have seen, advantageous to himself. He was not overgenerous to Poe but he gave him, as it is now possible to perceive, his last chance: he was at any rate more generous than any previous proprietor had been. But the old combination of causes began to operate, complicated, it would seem, by Graham's own hospitality. Then a further and crushing complication occurred. Virginia had her

first hemorrhage and ever after her life was unceasingly precarious, eventually doomed.

The precise nature of Poe's feeling for Virginia is impossible to estimate. She is the shadowiest figure in the whole of his story. There is hardly one word from her mouth recorded and the most definite impression one ever gets of her comes from statements that she "laughed merrily" at this or that. Visitors to the household saw Poe as the responsible person on one side of the family affairs (when he *was* responsible) and Mrs. Clemm on the other: Virginia never was, and nobody ever affected to treat her as, the mistress of her husband's establishment. We need not doubt that he was warmly attached to her and felt in the highest degree answerable for her welfare, but I do take leave to doubt that he really loved her "as no man ever loved before". This phrase occurs in the same letter in which he gives her condition as an excuse for his frailties and, though he may have been at the moment perfectly sincere in both statements, neither accords with the facts. It is highly likely that with her illness she acquired a new fascination for him. Much has been made of his inclination towards wasted and sickly types of beauty, but his wife at the time of their marriage and for several years afterwards did not correspond to this standard. When, for example, he wrote *The Fall of the House of Usher* and described the wan, emaciated Lady Madeline, Virginia was still not far removed from the "little girl with a round, ever-smiling face" who accompanied Mrs. Clemm on her shopping expeditions and carried the basket and was rather astonishingly addressed as Mrs. Poe. By a singular fatality she rather imitated than suggested his heroines.

When we come to describe the effect that her decline produced on her husband, we find ourselves on the edge of very dark places in his soul. It unquestionably set up in him a new, extraordinary and shattering excitement. His strange nature, with its ever-ready capacity for self-dramatisation, was secretly thrilled to see truth in his own household thus modelling itself upon poetry, and Virginia's calamity threw its shadow both before and after. He once declared that "the death of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world", and, though this was the culmination of a perfect insanity of pseudo-logical argument, yet for him it was something like the statement of a self-evident truth.

But while we take into account this obscure and terrible element in him, we must not overlook that side of him which desired to be practical, to be responsible, to be respectable. He was poor enough without prolonged and dangerous illness in his family, and the mere expense and anxiety, coupled with the impossibility of providing for Virginia all that her condition required, must have seemed to him a crowning cruelty just at the moment when with immense efforts he was getting on to his feet. At this time we first hear of frequent and really serious bouts of illness which are only indirectly caused by intemperance. He was sliding to and beyond the last point from which recovery would have been possible, and as things got worse with him so his power to make them better decreased. His vitality had begun to burn out from a variety of causes, of which drink and drugs provided only one. Anxiety, overwork and obscure spiritual storms, the nature of which we can only guess at from their effects, were doing direct physical

harm to his nerves and his heart. Too much drink increased the damage: so too, perhaps, did too little food. There must have been little enough food for any of them after Poe parted from Graham in 1842.

The connection with Graham proved to be the last serious chance that life gave him. Friends sought to obtain for him a Government office which would have afforded him a comfortable salary and made but little demand on time or energy. Whatever hope there may have been of his securing it vanished when he went to Washington to press his claims and spent most of his time there in a state of intoxication. In 1844, the family removed again to New York (a city from which Poe at his worst moments always had the greatest expectations) and during the three years enacted an increasingly squalid tragedy. At first he obtained an unflatteringly subordinate post on the *Evening Mirror*. Then came illusory flashes of better things. In 1845 three extraordinary events occurred. Poe finished *The Raven*, on which he had been at work since 1842, and its publication brought him popularity much wider than he had ever known before. He came at last into control of a magazine, *The Broadway Journal*, of which he was part proprietor. And, most astonishing of all, he arranged for a new edition of his tales on which, for the first time in his life, he was to receive a royalty. But these successes came too late to make a turning-point for him. He now showed himself to be at all points definitely *détraqué*. He became ever wilder and less dependable in his conduct and was involved in the most grotesque quarrels with the most grotesque people. *The Raven* brought him an invitation to give a recital at Boston, and he undertook to compose a new poem for the occa-

sion. Failing to do so, he delivered, in a wild and unintelligible manner, his early composition *Al Aaraaf*, and made the resultant fiasco a thousand times worse by explaining that he had not thought such an audience worth more trouble. It is impossible to believe that a man in Poe's position could, in his normal senses, have written the explanation of this incident which he gave in the *Broadway Journal*. It includes the assertion that he had written the poem and "printed it and published it, in book form, before we had fairly completed our tenth year". The magazine, his share of which had been acquired by borrowing money, soon failed because he was not able to borrow enough, and, probably, because his ability to give reasonable attention to routine work was by now irremediably impaired.

In 1846, the household found itself in a small cottage at Fordham, a village outside New York, worse off than it had ever been before, without food, without fuel, without clothes, and Virginia plainly dying. Persons "interested in literature", chiefly women, would call on them, and there were small benefactions. One of these visits, paid by a Mrs. Gore Nichols, who describes it, in company with "two or three gentlemen", gives a sufficient picture of Poe's last year of married life. The party strolled out into the woods and there someone suggested a contest of leaping. Mrs. Nichols thinks it must have been Poe since (uninventable touch!) he was "expert in the exercise". At any rate, he triumphed, but in the triumph he burst his shoes. The visitors, conscious that they were in the presence of a tragedy, slunk away. But Mrs. Nichols was obliged to return to the house and there found Poe in a silent, stupefied condition and Mrs. Clemm saying in dismay, "Oh,

Eddie! how did you burst your gaiters? Do answer Muddie." This shows better than any more important incident could the depths into which Poe had fallen and his inability, the result of sheer spiritual fatigue, to face misfortune—more especially since it is clear that he cannot on this occasion have been under the influence of drink or drugs. Mrs. Clemm was more resourceful than her son-in-law. She drew Mrs. Nichols aside and explained that if one of the other leapers, who was an editor, would accept Eddie's latest poem all would be well. This poem, which Mr. Hervey Allen conjectures to be *Ulalume*, had already been read by the visitors, who had thought it nonsense. But the editor felt obliged to pay for the ill consequences of his game of leaping, and, says Mrs. Nichols, "I presume it is regarded as genuine poetry in the collected poems of its author, but then it bought the poet a pair of gaiters, and twelve shillings over". Earlier in his decadence Poe could do this sort of thing for himself. He had sought to sell to Graham an early version of *The Raven* and, pleading against Graham's opinion both his own poverty and the merits of the poem, agreed to submit to a vote of the entire office staff. This went against him but the hat was taken round and he realised fifteen dollars. Now he was too weary even to take round the hat.

It was done on his behalf on a public scale late in this last year and some of Virginia's wants were supplied, but she died on January 29th, 1847.



## CHAPTER IV

THE END, 1847-1849

IN the light of what happened, it is easy for us to see now that the end of Poe's tragedy became a foregone conclusion when Virginia died. But it did not seem so to him at the time. The effects of her death upon his exacerbated and hysterical sensibilities were severe and he was not the man to make any attempt to withstand them. If we discount his asseverations of the depth of his love for his wife, that does not mean that he had not for her a very true affection. But, once he had recovered from the first shock, he was far from regarding his loss as a fatal blow. On the contrary, his hopes rose again, like a sinking balloon which recoils from the ground after first striking it. He knew that his practical hold on life had not been through Virginia but through her mother, and that practical hold was still left to him. It was as well that it was, for he was gravely ill when his wife died and needed careful attention.

After he had recovered, his prospects for a little while seemed to be brighter. He might easily be excused for thinking that, with this greatest of all catastrophes, the enmity of the fates must be exhausted and that his luck would turn. The success of his libel action brought him a little much-needed money and

also the first and last public triumph he ever enjoyed over his enemies. That may well have suggested to him that a new and happier period of his life had begun.

Then, too, there was another thought in his mind. He continued to lean upon Mrs. Clemm (she told a pathetic story of his leaning on her literally) but she could not pretend to give him all that he wanted of woman. He cherished the memory of Virginia and he may have felt, as a poet, that

Das ganze Gewinn meines Lebens  
Ist ihren Verlust zu beweinen.

But, as a man of pride and ambition, he determined also that his second wife should be a woman of adult intellect and one fitted to assist him in the prosecution of his designs. It was a mere detail that he had not yet decided whom he should marry. There was now a new and delicious half-reality in the literary flirtations in which he had begun to engage even before he was a widower. There was an extraordinary thrill in the thought that at any moment he could resolve to turn the half into a whole. When that should have happened, when he should have chosen the right woman, the rest would follow. The rest, of course, meant the establishment of his magazine, its success, and his own establishment as the leader of intellectual life in America. We must consider what hope he had of achieving his ambitions.

I have suggested before that it does not really help us much to consider Poe simply from the pathological point of view. He had, to be sure, one constitutional peculiarity, though not a very uncommon one. A very small quantity of liquor, one drink, probably, had a very

powerful effect on him. The wisdom of toppers upon toping has condensed itself into the profound adage that "when you've had one little one, you want one little one more". In Poe the first "little one" definitely set up a craving and sent to sleep everything in his nature that might have fought against it. Once he had begun, nothing but the involuntary revolt of the body could stop him, his will being powerless. That is, no doubt, indicative of an abnormal physical condition—a special susceptibility to the effects of alcohol. But I can find nothing in proof of the existence of a pathological craving in the absence of the first dose. On the other hand, there were obvious and pathetic reasons which constantly led him to disregard the dangers lying in wait for him, as he well knew, whenever he drank. He never lived for long without care and from care, when it became intolerable, he sought a refuge. He was also a reserved and diffident man who in most companies, and especially in the company of men, felt ill at ease and unable to talk with freedom. Drink removed his diffidence in talking even if, with extraordinary rapidity, it prevented him from talking at all.

My argument is that in different circumstances Poe might have been what he always longed to be—a sober, successful and respected man. But the circumstances would have had to be radically different. If John Allan had been a more sympathetic and generous guardian, it is still difficult to imagine how Poe could have been content in any occupation but that of literature and we have seen what obstacles stood in the way of any American of his time earning a decent living by that means. What should surprise us is not so much that a great genius was dragged in the mud as that its possessor

should so long have maintained the hope of ultimate triumph. There is nothing more heartrending in all Poe's life than the wild optimism of his last years. It is almost unbearable to read what he writes in *Marginalia*, with so obvious a reference to himself, and the esteem in which he was generally held, that "we mere men of the world" should beware of insulting "some poor devil of a genius":

It is a common trick with these fellows, when on the point of attaining some long-cherished end, to sink themselves into the deepest possible abyss of seeming despair for no other purpose than that of increasing the space of success through which they have made up their minds immediately to soar.

By the time of Virginia's death, the circumstances had done their irrevocable work. If, even then, success, comfort, freedom from care had come to Poe, it is doubtful whether he would have lived much longer than he actually did or written much more of importance. A doctor who attended him in 1848 said, "He has heart disease and will die early in life". It is obvious that not only his heart but his mind as well had been affected by drink, drugs and anxiety. If he had not been before, he was certainly by now a case for the alienist, and the work on which he was engaged in 1847 must rank as a symptom of his mental state.

*Eureka* may fitly receive a brief consideration here; partly because it is a symptom and partly because, as a symptom, it does not fall very conveniently into any of the categories in which his work can be distributed. The preface reveals a good deal:

To the few who love me and whom I love—to those who feel rather than to those who think—to the dreamers and

those who put faith in dreams as in the only realities—I offer this Book of Truths, not in its character of Truth-Teller, but for the Beauty that abounds in its Truth; constituting it true. To these I present the composition as an Art-Product alone:—let us say as a Romance, or, if I be not urging too lofty a claim, as a Poem.

*What I here propound is true:*—therefore it cannot die:—or if by any means it be now trodden down so that it die, it will “rise again to the Life Everlasting.”

Nevertheless, it is as a Poem only that I wish this work to be judged after I am dead.

E. A. P.

Sanity is sufficiently strong in him to make him understand that his book will not be generally accepted as an exposition of literal scientific truth, and this caution illustrates vividly enough the borderland in which he now lived, a country in which every now and again the light of reality burst through delusions. But he really did mean, in a literal sense, every word that he wrote in *Eureka*. Before it was published he sent to a friend “a loose summary of my propositions and results”, ending with the declaration that “what I have propounded will (in good time) revolutionise the world of Physical and Metaphysical Science. I say this calmly—but I say it.” A visitor who called on him to advise on the publication of this startling work thus records his recollections of the interview:

For some time his tone and manner were very quiet, though slowly changing as we went on, until at last a look of scornful pride, worthy of Milton’s Satan, flashed over his pale delicate face and broad brow, and a strange thrill nerved and dilated for an instant his slight figure, as he exclaimed, “My whole nature utterly *revolts* at the idea that there is any Being in the Universe superior to *myself*!”

“I knew then”, the visitor adds, “that there was no use

in further argument"—he may even have felt that there was some danger.

George Putnam, to whom Poe took the manuscript, had a similar experience:

Newton's discovery of gravitation (Poe told Putnam) was a mere incident compared with the discoveries revealed in this book. It would at once command such unusual and intense interest that the publisher might give up all other enterprises, and make this one book the business of his lifetime. An edition of fifty thousand copies might be sufficient to begin with, but it would be but a small beginning. No other scientific event in the history of the world approached in importance the original developments of the book. All this and more, not in irony or jest, but in *intense* earnest—for he held me with his eye, like the Ancient Mariner.

Poe can no longer hold one with his glittering eye but *Eureka* remains a prickly book to handle. After a grandiose statement of the theme, the author proceeds to quote a letter supposed to have been written in the year A.D. 2848. This is in a familiar vein, one of blood-curdling facetiousness:

Long, long ago in the night of Time there lived a Turkish philosopher called Aries and surnamed Tottle . . . (who) flourished supreme, until the advent of one Hogg, surnamed the Ettrick Shepherd, who preached an entirely different system, which he called the *a posteriori* or *inductive*. . . . Baconian, you must know, my dear friend, was an adjective invented as equivalent to Hogg-ian, and at the same time more dignified and euphonious.

But, for all this repulsive introduction, for all Poe's megalomaniac ideas of its worth, the book is not to be dismissed as mere raving. He was no scientist, but he uses a good many phrases and makes a good many suggestions reminiscent of those to be found in the popular

cosmogonies which are so widely read to-day. He says, several years before Clerk-Maxwell, that "to electricity we *may* not be wrong in referring the various physical appearances of light, heat and magnetism". He adds, and the addition is characteristic, that "far less shall we be liable to err in attributing to this strictly spiritual principle the more important phenomena of vitality, consciousness and *thought*". He tells us that the sun and its system belong to a "lenticular star-island or collection of stars", which is known as the Galaxy and which "is but one, and perhaps one of the most inconsiderable, of the clusters which go to the constitution" of the Universe. It is perhaps worth adding that he insists that all forms of matter are built up out of a primal undifferentiated stuff.

In writing *Eureka* Poe belonged to a certain extent to the same category as Goethe and Samuel Butler in their concern with scientific matters. He spent no time, as Goethe did, in experiment or observation. It is to be doubted whether he had as much knowledge of the literature of his subject as Butler and he was certainly not endowed with Butler's penetrative common sense. One thing can be said, of the three of them, that their suggestions, not much regarded in their own time, though they were in advance of it, are out of date now.

Poe's happy shots at truth (he applauds Kepler for having guessed, and guessed rightly, and clearly claims to be doing the same thing himself) are interesting literary curiosities. What affects us here is the frame of mind in which he presented *Eureka* to the world. It would appear from the conversation with Putnam that he saw in it practical possibilities which had always

evaded him. It was to make him famous and rich. That view of it, however, occurred to him in the moments when, like a man who is going blind, he still contrived to grope his way among the obstacles of this life. In other moments his feelings about it were purer but no less fantastic. He believed that he could explain the Universe. As he drew nearer to the final catastrophe, all the old ambitions generalised themselves and swelled into a vast cloud. In this way he would by one stroke redeem all previous failures and demonstrate his greatness not only to all the rest of the world but also to himself.

The book, of course, was a failure (though he did get a little money from it) and so were the lectures based on it by which he hoped to raise funds to start his magazine. Meanwhile he was more than ever dependent on feminine support and sympathy. It was not enough that Mrs. Clemm was prepared to devote every moment to him and even to attempt to understand his cosmogony. He wanted more, and the first person to whom he turned for it was Mrs. Marie Louise Shew, who had been of invaluable assistance to the whole family during Virginia's illness.

He was not, perhaps, in love with her. It may be doubted whether, at any rate after early youth, he was ever in love with anyone, in the sense in which that expression is commonly understood. But he wanted to be wholly dependent on her and he wanted her to take responsibility for him. She helped him to write *The Bells*. It is true that there are several stories of how this poem was written and that hers is clearly not the whole story, but there is documentary evidence that, in his extravagance of gratitude, he sought to



attribute its authorship to her. But she took alarm at his ecstasy of self-surrender. He had placed well-meaning women in awkward positions before, and she did not mean to be another of them. She broke with Poe, who, in a letter of protesting farewell, said, "Unless some true and tender and womanly love saves me, I shall hardly last a year longer alive".

But there had been no question of marrying Mrs. Shew. He sought in her merely a counterpart on the intellectual side to "Muddie" on the domestic side. When she gave him up, he set out on greater and more decisive enterprises. It is not flippant to say that now he had a programme and that it consisted of marriage and a magazine. He needed both most desperately. Mrs. Clemm with all her devotion was not sufficient anchorage for him. She might walk up and down the garden with him, their arms round one another's waists, listening to passages from *Eureka* until, for weariness, she could not walk another step. But she could not stimulate him by judicious praise, because she did not know what to praise or why. Nor did she make a helpful impression on the acquaintances whose influence he desired for the furtherance of his schemes. He believed, probably wrongly, that a woman to whom he could give intellectual respect would be able to restrain all those elements in his own nature which he hated and feared. She would command respect in others, too. Her drawing-room would be furnished in good taste and entrance to it would be sought by elegant company. As the husband of such a woman, Mr. Poe would be thought more serious and trustworthy.

So far as the magazine goes, he was perfectly right. It was positively the only means of obtaining a secure

position that America had to offer him. When he was not entertaining exaggerated views about the success of *Eureka*, he knew very well that he could expect no substantial revenue from his books within a useful time. He knew also that he had proved his ability as an editor. So he continued to pursue the two mirages, and all his many journeys during this last period have a connection with one or other of them and most of them with both.

It would be impossible in any small space to give a connected account of his comings and goings between Virginia's death and his own. I can do no more here than try to give an impression of their effect.

There are three women mainly concerned. There is Sarah Helen Whitman, a widow, older than Poe and a writer of verse, notably a rather sickly piece about *The Raven*. There is Annie Richmond, a married woman. Lastly, and rather strangely, there is Elmira Royster, Poe's early love, now Mrs. Shelton and a widow.

With Mrs. Whitman he got so far as to arrange on a Thursday that they should be married on the following Monday. But in the interval she discovered that he had broken his promise of temperance and she considered herself absolved from her promise. She was a foolish and frigid woman, given to sniffing ether and dabbling in spiritualism. In her poem on *The Raven*, she wrote:

Romeo talks of "White doves trooping,  
Amid crows athwart the night,"  
But to see thy dark wing swooping  
Down the silvery path of light,  
Amid swans and dovelets stooping,  
Were, to me, a nobler sight . . .

Then, Oh! Grim and Ghastly Raven!  
Wilt thou to my heart and ear  
Be a Raven true as ever  
Flapped his wings and croaked "Despair"?  
Not a bird that roams the forest  
Shall our lofty eyrie share.

But she did not mean it. When Poe showed himself to be something other than a swan or a dovelet she hastily withdrew. His own letters to her constitute an almost unbearable aggravation of the nightmare of the last years. They thrust into the phantasmagoria created by his physical and mental condition a picture of the authentic "ring-tailed roarer" lashing himself into such sentiments as might move such a woman to a simper:

while you moved thus restlessly about the room—as if a deep sorrow or a most pronounced joy haunted your bosom—my brain reeled beneath the intoxicating spell of your presence, and it was with no merely human senses that I either saw or heard you.

After the engagement had been broken, but before he knew of the breach, Horace Greeley wrote to Rufus Griswold in amiable fashion: "I know a widow of doubtful age will marry almost any kind of a white man, but this seems to me to be a terrible conjunction. Has Mrs. Whitman no friend within your knowledge that could faithfully explain Poe to her?"

That would have been an extremely difficult task, as commentators have been finding for nearly a hundred years. But Mrs. Whitman did know enough about Poe to know that she would do unwisely if she married him, even if she did not know that within that same month of their projected marriage he had attempted suicide by laudanum, in order, apparently, that Mrs. Richmond might be induced to come to his deathbed.

Annie Richmond seems to have been a gentle and simple-hearted woman. But, had there been no other reason why she should not enter into closer relations with Poe, she was married and an elopement was unthinkable: even he did not think of it. But she continued to haunt his mind. He wrote her passionate letters while he was engaged to Mrs. Whitman. And there is one, tragically ridiculous, written to Mrs. Clemm in September 1849, in which he says that the objection to leaving Fordham is that he wants to live near Annie, that he cannot bear to hear anything about her unless he can hear that her husband is dead, and that he has got the wedding-ring for Elmira and thinks that there will be no difficulty about getting a dress-coat for himself to wear at the ceremony. His marriage to Elmira Shelton was fixed for October 17th, but it did not take place. Ten days before that he was dead.

Throughout all this time we get an impression of Poe feverishly travelling, arriving at this place and that, "the worse for wear", and being tended by patient friends until he was in a fit state to deliver a lecture or two. In Philadelphia he spent a night in gaol but was discharged without a fine when recognised as "Poe the poet". He was breaking up almost minute by minute like a ship that has gone ashore in a heavy sea. He found it ever harder to keep from stimulating drinks and sedative drugs and the penalties of excess grew heavier each new time that he incurred them. Heart and brain were going, and the last remnants of will-power were reduced to a rag.

There is no better proof of his moral disintegration than the letters he wrote to Mrs. Clemm on his last

journey to Richmond in 1849. From Philadelphia he wrote:

The very instant you get this come to me. The joy of seeing you will almost compensate for my sorrows. We can but die together. It is of no use to reason with me now; I must die. I have no desire to live since I have done *Eureka*. I could accomplish nothing more. For your sake it would be sweet to live, but we must die together.

A week later he reached Richmond and this is how he announced his arrival:

... I got here with two dollars over—of which I enclose you one. Oh, God, my Mother, shall we ever meet again? If possible, oh COME! My clothes are so horrible and I am so ill. Oh, if you could come to me, my mother. Write instantly—Oh do not fail. God forever bless you.

When these words were written Mrs. Clemm was at home at Fordham, quite unable to go to him for want of the fare but well able to imagine what might be happening to her Eddie while he was out of her hands. They were, in fact, the unconscious cruelty of a broken man, a man too much broken to realise or care that his woes might afflict another scarcely better fitted to bear them.

These terrible letters might well have been the epilogue, but they were not. A few days elapse and he writes again, saying of his late attack: "May Heaven grant that it prove a warning to me for the rest of my days". He experienced a brief revival in Richmond, proposed to, and was accepted by, Elmira, and set out for home. Just before his departure, Elmira wrote a letter to "Muddie" which was all that could be desired in the way of prospective daughterliness:

I am fully prepared to *love* you, and I do hope that our spirits may be congenial. . . I have just spent a very happy evening with your dear Edgar, and I know it will be gratifying to you to know that he is all that you could desire him to be, sober, temperate, moral, and much beloved.

The most picturesque, if also the most horrible, story of the end seems to be the best authenticated. Poe arrived in Baltimore in the middle of an election campaign. It was the pleasant practice of the politicians of Baltimore at that time to commandeer any stray fragment of humanity which could not look after itself and induce it, by means of drink, drugs and violence, to vote again and again for the candidates favoured by its captors. Poe was in the right condition to play the part, but this experiment in civics was too much for him.

He was rescued on election-day, but too late. Four days afterwards he died, apparently in torture. His death-cries recalled the most agonising episode in *Arthur Gordon Pym*: it seemed to him that he was dying of thirst. We do not know whether he actually took a hand in electing the rulers of Mr. H. L. Mencken's home-town. But we need not think that his kidnappers did a great wrong to literature. They may have hastened their victim's death by a few months—not by more than a year at the outside. He might, however, have died in peace, with one or more of the women, on whom he so much depended, at hand to comfort him.

The legend, already in existence in his lifetime but still cloudy and formless, was now to take shape. In some ways it was, as we shall see later, almost as important as the truth. Much unnecessary wonder has been expended on the fact that Poe left his reputation, both as a man and as an author, in the hands of the

Reverend Rufus Griswold. It is possible that he dreaded what Griswold would say and—being ever a poor judge of character—thought this the surest way of disarming him. Another, and stronger, possibility is that it was done in a maudlin mood and forgotten as soon as done. He can hardly have foreseen the result. Learning of Poe's death, Griswold sat down to write an obituary notice which began with these words:

Edgar Allan Poe is dead. He died in Baltimore the day before yesterday. This announcement will startle many, but few will be grieved by it. The poet was well known, personally or by reputation, in all this country; he had readers in England, and in several of the states of Continental Europe, but he had no friends.

Griswold was one of those journalistic clergymen—they are not always in orders—who find that there is more to be made out of the printing-press than out of the pulpit, but always on the condition that they do not forget that they are clergymen. There is no need to suppose that he was moved by any special malevolence towards Poe. The American authors of that time, with a few honourable exceptions—among whom Poe himself cannot be reckoned—were inclined to be very malevolent towards one another. The dead man was "good copy" for a moralist and Griswold was a professional moralist. It would have been wasting an opportunity if he had introduced reservations and extenuations into his portrait, or if, amid a profusion of gossip, he had preferred a moderate version of any incident to one more highly coloured. In Griswold's hands Poe became after his death, on a larger scale, what he had been during his life. He was held up to the public as a dreadful example for all who may be tempted to think that

devotion to intellectual and poetic ideals can weigh against disregard of the maxims of prudence and temperance. Griswold was of service to the legend. He had something to do with the adoption of Poe as a hero by those who, on another continent, deliberately and defiantly held that a poet ought to be at outs with cautious society. "*Ce pédagogue-vampire!*" says Baudelaire, who might not have liked Poe so much if he had not disliked all Griswolds more.



## CHAPTER V

### THE POET

"EVENTS not to be controlled", said Poe in the preface to his volume of 1845, "have prevented me from making, at any time, any serious effort in what, under happier circumstances, would have been the field of my choice."

We may question how far the *events* of his life were ultimately responsible but we cannot deny that as a poet he was frustrated and unsuccessful. He was harassed and embarrassed all his life by his circumstances and his weaknesses. But other men, no less heavily handicapped, whether by temperament or by material things, have left behind them work which gives a stronger sense of substantial achievement. Baudelaire and Verlaine, for example, of whom one naturally thinks, had lives which were in some respects as miserable as that of Poe. But *Les Fleurs du mal* and *Sagesse* are poetry achieved, whole and perfect. Poe's work in verse is, even at its best, only poetry desired, seen at a distance and imperfectly realised. Baudelaire, who recognised in Poe a brother, wrestled with the angel and overcame him. The angel escaped from Poe's grasp and we have barely more than a bedraggled bright feather or two to show us that there ever *was* an angel.

Poe might serve as a strong proof of the old belief that all poetry exists already elsewhere and is merely transcribed by an earthly hand from the heavenly original. But the same thought can be put in a different way in terms of a more modern psychology. Poetry, let us say, comes into existence in the subconscious mind and must be brought thence by the conscious effort of the poet. This would account for the odd sensation experienced by many poets that now and then there is a cessation of the true interior flow, during which they must either be silent or do what they can with a deliberate use of intellect. Poe himself clearly had something of this sort in mind when he said that "one-half of the *Paradise Lost* is essentially prose—a succession of poetical excitements interspersed, *inevitably*, with corresponding depressions".

He adduced this example in support of his assertion that a poem ought not to exceed one hundred lines in length. But it is at least probable that that belief sprang from his own experience of the briefness and intermittency of true poetic inspiration. Poetic inspiration is felt when the poet does seem to be getting news from some other tract of being, even if it be only an infrequently accessible tract of his own mind. Its variations may perhaps be best expressed if we imagine a man making a tracing on a sheet of paper of varying degrees of transparency. Sometimes what he is tracing disappears altogether and he can only guess to the best of his ability at what it should be.

With Poe the variations in the thickness of the tracing paper are many and sudden. We are certain that there was a bold and original and lovely design. But there are only parts of it reproduced on the

sheet which Poe has given us. These parts are unmistakeable but the rest of the sheet is filled either with coarse and fumbling approximations or with the crude inventions of a hand which had lost the design altogether.

We have but sixty poems certainly from Poe's hand and some of these could as easily have been written by anyone out of a score of his contemporaries. This, for example:

But he spoke to re-assure me,  
And he kissed my pallid brow,  
While a reverie came o'er me,  
And to the church-yard bore me,  
And I sighed to him before me,  
(Thinking him dead D'Elormie)  
"Oh, I am happy now!"

Even as a poet, he spent some of his time as a ring-tailed roarer, the fellow, the equal and the admirer of the Reverend Ralph Hoyt and Mrs. Lydia M. Child. This character wrote, perhaps with a little more vigour than the Childs and the Hoyts, a number of the poems which were signed by the author of *Israfel* and *Ulalume*. But he did worse than that: he could rarely refrain from taking a hand in those poems which the Hoyts and the Childs could not have written (and which, when they saw them, they were generally disposed to regard as nonsense). When the poet is lamenting the death of the lost Lenore, the ring-tailed roarer rushes in to insist that she had been loved by Guy de Vere.

Poe's poetry is, to put it shortly, blurred. It has character enough to make us feel the existence . . . somewhere . . . of more than the writer has been able to capture in his words. He babbles of a lovely music

which no one else has ever heard but he can do no more than hum a phrase here and there, and that often in a cracked voice and out of tune. But, even so, he does convince us that he has heard something not heard by any other man.

The critic who would seek to trace the development of Poe as a poet is not greatly assisted by external evidence. He, of course, lied about his work—it would have been strange in him had he not. It pleased his quarrelsome vanity to dismiss compositions which had been, or might be, admired, as productions of the merest childhood, green fruit to which he himself attached no importance. But, apart from this, the chronology of the poems is extremely confused and doubtful. He himself says that he wrote *Helen, thy beauty is to me*, which many will consider the most perfect of his lyrics, if not very characteristic, when he was fourteen. It seems unlikely, but we do not know when, if not then, he did write it. Of most of his pieces we have no more than the date of publication, which is far from being satisfactory. Even when there is private evidence, as of someone saying in a letter, or a memoir, that Poe read aloud a poem called *Ulalume*, which he had just finished, it is rarely conclusive.

But we can make at least a beginning with *Al Aaraaf* and *Tamerlane*, compositions suiting well enough with the age at which their author published them. The first of these raises another problem. To judge from allusions, the English poets living in Poe's lifetime who most impressed him were Byron, Coleridge, Tennyson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and "Orion" Horne. He also studied Wordsworth but not with much admira-

tion—or understanding. It is true that at least twice he mentions Keats, whom Mr. Hervey Allen, without citing any evidence, names as one of the poets who influenced him in his early years.

The evidence which Mr. Allen does not call is to be found in *Al Aaraaf*, and it is evidence of an almost subservient discipleship. This is a poem of over four hundred lines, its author's longest composition in verse, written partly in lyrical measures, partly in decasyllabic couplets. It was undoubtedly a work of Poe's youth: he published it before he reached his majority. It might be taken as an illustration of Coleridge's dictum that one of the promises of genius is "the choice of subjects very remote from the private interests and circumstances of the writer himself".

But the first reflection likely to occur to the persevering reader of it is that Poe was wise in denying, for himself at any rate, the possibility of writing a poem of more than one hundred lines. It carries with it, for explanation, the following argument:

A star was discovered by Tycho Brahe which appeared suddenly in the heavens—attained, in a few days, a brilliancy surpassing that of Jupiter—then suddenly disappeared, and has never been seen since.

(This interest in astronomical fact is worth remembering in connection with *Eureka*.) Poe, as a boy, imagines the star *Al Aaraaf* as wandering through the universe and approaching now this system, now that:

'Twas a sweet time for Nesace—for there  
Her world lay lolling on the golden air,  
Near four bright suns—a temporary rest—  
An oasis in desert of the blest.



*Tamerlane*, written earlier and published in 1827 but afterwards rewritten, is as plainly a result of the influence of Byron. It is, especially in the revised version, altogether a more coherent and intelligible piece of work than *Al Aaraaf*. *Tamerlane* (not Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* by a long way, though Poe had read Marlowe) in the hour of death regrets that he has allowed ambition to replace love in his heart. He somewhat oddly speaks of himself as having been "a cottager" and describes his boyhood's passion:

We grew in age—and love—together—  
Roaming the forest, and the wild;  
My breast her shield in wintry weather—  
And, when the friendly sunshine smil'd,  
And she would mark the opening skies,  
*I saw no Heaven—but in her eyes.*

It is simple stuff, perhaps, but at its best good, straightforward, vigorous stuff, the rhetoric of a boy who has just discovered what fun it is to be energetically rhetorical. His natural delight in his own powers is shown by his remark on another passage in the same volume—"I am certain that these lines have never been surpassed". The lines are:

Of late, eternal Condor years  
So shake the very Heaven on high  
With tumult as they thunder by,  
I have no time for idle cares  
Through gazing on the unquiet sky.

They hardly justify the claim, but no one could deny that they are good of their sort. They make it quite easy to imagine the young man repeating them to himself over and over again and with each repetition gaining new confidence in his future.

The best of the volume of 1829 is of this sort, with

little if any suggestion of the Poe of *Ulalume* or *Annabel Lee*. He was in fact still a normal man with a mind still unaffected by drink, drugs and misery. The best of all is *To Helen*, which might without too much fancifulness be described as the best poem so uncharacteristic of its author that ever was written. It is not necessary to accept Poe's assertion that he wrote it when he was fourteen—though stranger things have happened. It is certain that he wrote it before he was twenty-one. And, in spite of one flaw, it is a fine lyric. The mixture of the classical theme, originating in Helen's name, with the quite different suggestions contained in "window-niche" and "Holy-land" is one of those blunders which do not matter in comparison with the total effect. The world has recognised, perhaps even too generously, the epigrammatic aptness of

The glory that was Greece  
And the grandeur that was Rome.

(But let us pause for a minute to think of what would have been the feelings of the raw and ambitious Virginian youth who wrote them if he could have known then what currency they were to have.)

Save for one phrase there is nothing in this poem of the quality which makes Poe so different from anyone else. It is poetry written in a clear light. We can find mystery and the inexplicable only in the allusion to "those Nicaean barks of yore". It would be as hard to say what Poe had in mind as to deny power to the very obscurity of the reference.

He made one more ambitious attempt in a type of work in which he was not at all likely to be successful. The "scenes from an unpublished drama", *Politian*,



seem to have been founded on a contemporary tragedy in Kentucky. Poe chose for them Rome of that peculiar undefined period which used to appear so suitable for poetic drama. It is necessary only to quote the opening lines to show that we need not regret his failure to finish it:

*Rome. A Hall in a Palace. Alessandra and  
Castiglione.*

ALESSANDRA. Thou art sad, Castiglione.

CASTIGLIONE. Sad!—not I.

Oh, I'm the happiest, happiest man in Rome!  
A few days more, thou knowest, my Alessandra,  
Will make thee mine. Oh, I am happy!

ALESS. Methinks thou hast a singular way of showing  
Thy happiness!—what ails thee, cousin of mine?  
Why didst thou sigh so deeply?

CAS. Did I sigh?

I was not conscious of it. It is a fashion,  
A silly—a most silly fashion I have  
When I am *very* happy. Did I sigh? (*sighing*)

There is not enough of the piece to enable one to judge Poe's talent for handling a plot or for characterisation. But he was clearly a poor hand in dramatic dialogue, and the blank verse is poor even in the fragment of it which he thought well enough to publish separately as *The Coliseum*.

The characteristic poems, those on which his reputation rests and from which his influence proceeds, are few in number, so few that it is possible to enumerate them all. It is probable that others will disagree at points with my list, desiring this or that omitted or another included. But I do not think that there can be substantial disagreement with the choice of *The Raven*, *Lenore*, *The City in the Sea*, *The Conqueror Worm*, *The Haunted Palace*, *For Annie*, *Eldorado*, *Annabel Lee*,

*Ulalume*, *Israfel*, *Dreamland* and *The Valley of Unrest*. To these, with a certain hesitation, I add *The Bells*, which, much as one may dislike it, owes its fame to more than the temptation it so recklessly offers to the reciter.

It is easier to recognise than to define the particular quality which is to be found in all these pieces. We have spoken of mystery and the inexplicable and to do so is almost to disclaim in advance the possibility of explanation. No doubt if the material were available it would be possible to apply to Poe the method which, in *The Journey to Xanadu*, Professor Lowes has applied to Coleridge. The best clues we have to his reading are in the *Marginalia* and they are not very helpful. But even if we knew where he found all his images, or their raw material, we should be as far as ever from understanding how they took on their particular shape and flavour in his mind. Certainly he did not understand it himself. He owned that the last stanza of *Ulalume* was a puzzle to him, and nothing can be clearer than that the process by which his greater poems were written was beyond his comprehension.

If proof of this were needed, it might be found in the fantastic exactitude with which he explained the composition of *The Raven*. He was, he says, determined to compose "a poem that should suit at once the popular and the critical taste". He had first to decide how long it should be and fixed on one hundred lines as a maximum. "My next thought", he says, "concerned the choice of an impression, or effect, to be conveyed." He chose "that intense and pure elevation of *soul*—not of intellect, or of heart—. . . which is experienced in consequence of contemplating 'the beautiful'". He then

made up his mind that the tone should be one of sadness. Next came the search for "some artistic piquancy" and he hit upon the notion of a refrain. This, "to have force, must be sonorous and susceptible of protracted emphasis", and "these considerations inevitably led me to the long *o* as the most sonorous vowel in connection with *r* as the most producible consonant". Hence, we are asked to believe, the word "Nevermore". The rest of the exposition, including the poet's reason for preferring a raven to a parrot and his demonstration that "the death of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world", may be passed over.

It must not be supposed that this pseudo-confession throws no light on the manner in which his poetry came into existence. But it is obviously an example of working back from the accomplished fact, like the writer of a detective story. It is also an example of his desire to impress. "You have admired *The Raven*", he says in effect—"well, this is how it was done. It was no lucky chance nor yet a casual gift from Heaven. I did it in cold blood and I can do as good again whenever I have the inclination and the time."

But while denying the cold-bloodedness, denying (as indeed the facts deny) his ability to write a *Raven* when he chose, we must not overlook the fact that Poe was, at any rate potentially, a great technician and innovator in verse. On this point I desire to call an expert witness. John Davidson, an English poet, justice to whom has been so long delayed that one despairs of it ever being done, was not himself a discoverer in versification but he was an exact and scholarly workman and his estimate of the technical discoveries of others

is not to be disregarded. Towards the end of his life he wrote thus about Poe:

Rhyme is originally a property of decadence, and when new decay demands expression a new order of rhyme is certainly evolved. The form of re-echoing rhyme which I have used in some of the eclogues in this volume comes, of course, from America, the exquisite invention of the most original genius in words the world has ever known—Edgar Allan Poe. It is impossible to over-estimate the intensity of the mood in which this poet discovered that the same word can rhyme to itself with entirely new sound if the preceding phraseology is changed; this is the intensity that gilds the autumn leaf, that emigrates to America and establishes the United States, that crimsones the evening sky, that crosses the Atlantic to haunt Europe passionately, that fills a dying fancy with the whole past in a moment of time.<sup>1</sup>

Davidson continues to elaborate the theory that America is the decadence of Europe, a theory on which we need not dwell here. But his characterisation of the re-echoing rhyme as “an exquisite invention” goes at once to the heart of greatness which existed in Poe but which circumstances withheld from its due development.

Who, if he tries to think of the impression made on him by Poe’s poetry as a whole, eliminating memories of this or that particular line, thinking only of the general effect, does not think first of that singular echo the use of which no other writer, not even Davidson, has mastered? It has been suggested by the late T. Earle Welby that Poe found the first hint of it in Elizabeth Barrett Browning whom he certainly admired to an almost immoderate degree. Unfortunately Welby does not say what passage he has in mind. But this occurs in Mrs. Browning’s lyrical drama *The Seraphim*:

<sup>1</sup> In the essay *On Poetry*, appended to *Holiday and Other Poems*, 1906.

ADOR    And the golden harps the angels bore  
          To help the songs of their desire  
          Lie without touch or tone  
          Upon the glass-sea shore.  
ZERAH   Silent upon the glass-sea shore!

This is very remote from Poe's device but one can just see in it such a germ as a great technical genius seizes upon wherever he may find it. Mrs. Browning, one may surmise, was pleased with the effect, but she did not observe its possibilities of development. She cannot indeed be said to have had any very acute sensibilities on the technical side of her poetry: what she had to say required no new subtleties of versification. But Poe, with something in him that he felt to be almost inexpressible, did feel that necessity. The new device, however it may have revealed itself to him, was a heaven-sent means of conveying what he must otherwise have left unsaid.

What is extraordinary is that he, in spite of his pre-occupation with the technique of verse, seems not to be aware that here he has invented anything. He thinks a good deal about the functions of rhyme. In *The Rationale of Verse*, he suggests that it is the natural course of evolution that poets should "adventure so far as to indulge in positive rhyme at other points than the ends of lines". In the *Marginalia* he goes into the question more thoroughly. He says:

Perfection of rhyme is attainable only in the combination of the two elements, Equality and Unexpectedness. But as evil cannot exist without good, so unexpectedness must arise from expectedness. We do not contend for mere *arbitrariness* of rhyme. In the first place, we must have equi-distant or regularly recurring rhymes to form the basis, expectedness, out of which arises the element unexpectedness, by the

introduction of rhymes, not arbitrarily, but with an eye to the greatest amount of unexpectedness. We should not introduce them, for example, at such points that the entire line is a multiple of the syllables preceding the points. When, for instance, I write—

And the silken, sad, uncertain rustling of each purple curtain,

I produce more, to be sure, but not remarkably more than the ordinary effect of rhymes regularly recurring at the ends of lines; for the number of syllables in the whole verse is merely a multiple of the number of syllables preceding the rhyme introduced at the middle, and there is still left therefore a certain degree of expectedness. What there is of the element unexpectedness, is addressed, in fact, to the eye only—for the ear divides the verse into two ordinary lines, thus:

And the silken, sad, uncertain  
Rustling of each purple curtain.

I obtain, however, the whole effect of unexpectedness when I write—

*Thrilled me, filled me with fantastic terrors never felt before.*

He comes nearest when he says (this again in the *Rationale*) that “further cultivation would improve also the *refrain* by relieving its monotone in slightly varying the phrase at each repetition, or (as I have attempted to do in *The Raven*) in retaining the phrase and varying its application”. Perhaps he *felt* the device to be too magically intimate, too closely connected with his desire to express what could never be said by words alone, for him to be able to think about it analytically.

Its use is confined to a few poems, all written during such maturity as was allowed to him. It first appears, imperfectly used, in *Lenore*:

The life upon her yellow hair, but not within her eyes—  
The life still there upon her hair, the death upon her eyes.

The internal rhyme in the second line, with its almost jaunty effect, spoils the echo and shows that he had not learnt the proper use of the instrument he had fashioned. Even much later, for example in *For Annie*, he is still uncertain of its capabilities and misuses it by changing the meaning of the echoing word as well as the preceding phrase:

Sadly, I know  
I am shorn of my strength,  
And no muscle I move  
As I lie at full length—  
But no matter!—I feel  
I am better at length.

It may be remarked, however, that this poem does suggest a deliberate attempt to discover in what ways the device can best be used.

But it appears quite triumphant only in *Ulalume*, which, if we could preserve only one piece to justify to the future the importance we ascribe to Poe, should be the piece chosen. The members of the party to which he read it at Fordham could not understand it but they had better warrant than usual for this imperceptiveness. It was, if not absolutely a masterpiece of a new sort, at least a definite point in the growth of a new spirit in literature. There is nothing extravagant in saying that none of Poe's contemporaries *could* have seen as much of its significance as we can to-day—now that its consequences have thrown a light backward upon it. He himself confessed that he could make nothing of the last stanza and it is probable that he was in the dark about most of them—as much in the dark as Columbus about the geography of the Americas. But here he definitely touched on an unknown land, one which was

to be explored and settled and cultivated by those who came after him.

What does *Ulalume* mean? Mr. J. W. Krutch detects in it "an easily interpretable symbolism". Astarte, the goddess of fleshly love, tempts the poet and "in spite of the warning of his true goddess, leads him away only to bring him once more face to face with the tomb whose closed doors, so he now remembers, shut him forever from the possibility of further love". "Who then was this mysterious *Ulalume*?" Mr. Krutch asks and, having failed to answer, proceeds:

But one thing is fairly certain. Poe could not love in the normal fashion and the reason lay, or at least seemed to him to lay [*sic*], in the death of some woman upon whom his desire had irrevocably fixed itself. If we knew who lay behind the doors of that tomb in the ghoulish-woodland of Weir, we should know the answer to the greatest riddle of Poe's life.

Mr. Krutch here is not dealing with the poem as poetry, not, that is to say, with its value to others than the poet. He is avowedly grinding a quite legitimate axe of a different kind. He desires to find in Poe's chosen subject and images a confirmation of his belief that the man's wretched life can be explained if we suppose that he was, whether for physical or for mental reasons, physically impotent. Poe, however, could have expressed, or betrayed, this fact in a poem of no poetic merit. We must not suppose that even if we accept it we have grasped all that there is to know about *Ulalume*. I have quoted Mr. Krutch to show that the poem bears a readily discoverable surface meaning and that what puzzled the poet himself and its first audience must be something underneath the surface.



At this point let me make one thing clear. I do not mean to argue that *Ulalume* itself was the work through which Poe's influence on his admirers and successors was principally exercised. I do not think that it was. But it is the poem in which the element in him which gave him his influence can now be seen in its purest form. It is, let us say, the first great poem of the Symbolist School. It is a poem which transfers from the writer to the reader a state of mind which neither of them can define in precise terms. That is what Poe always did at his best, sometimes only in a few lines here and there, or even in only a single phrase, but here in a whole piece. To read *Ulalume* is a peculiar and exciting experience, though one may not be able afterwards to attach any exact intellectual significance to it.

No great poem is in character entirely new. There are premonitions of the character of *Ulalume*, especially in Coleridge (whom Poe comically went out of his way to reprove for his disregard of the facts of observation). But a poet making a great step forward in the development of an existing tendency instinctively feels a need for novelty in technique and Poe had it in the "re-echoing rhyme". In *Ulalume* he begins with it at once and so establishes the especial tone of the poem:

The skies they were ashen and sober;  
The leaves they were crispéd and sere—  
The leaves they were withering and sere:  
It was night, in the lonesome October  
Of my most immemorial year:  
It was hard by the dim lake of Auber,  
In the misty mid region of Weir—  
It was down by the dank tarn of Auber,  
In the ghoul-haunted woodland of Weir.

There are defects in the piece to which it is easy to

point. One may enquire as to the meaning of "immemorial". One may see in Mount Yaanek only an unhappily forced and not even true rhyme to "volcanic". One may object to the stress on the first syllable of "Lethean" and to the rhyming of "linger" and "sink her". If one of his contemporaries had written such a line as

To shine on us with her bright eyes,

Poe himself would have scornfully desired to know how it was meant to be scanned.

But the faults of technique are few and, even were they not lost in the effect of the whole, they would be outnumbered by the triumphs of technique. There are other lines that are irregular in scansion but for good reason. The first of them,

We noted not the dim lake of Auber,

introduces the note of spiritual disturbance which deepens to dismay and terror as that hurried pulsing is heard again and again. Even when all its lapses are clearly seen, *Ulalume* must be regarded as a masterpiece of execution, of the adaptation of means to end.

But to what end? Simply that, I think, which is intended in most musical compositions. We may not doubt that it had its origin in some experiences of the author, and the experience may even have been that of Mr. Krutch's hypothesis. But the value of the poem to the reader is precisely in the sensation of spiritual disturbance deepening to dismay and terror. The rhymes, images and phrases by which this sensation is conveyed are as generalised as the medium of music. *Ulalume* is as much and as little autobiographical as a nocturne by Chopin.

I am aware that this method of defining the value of a poem has a slightly old-fashioned ring about it. It is reminiscent of Verlaine's

De la musique encore et toujours!  
Que ton vers soit la chose envolée  
Qu'on sent qui fuit d'une âme en allée  
Vers d'autres cieux à d'autres amours.

It has not been much used since we ceased to regard the Symbolists (or, as some of them preferred to call themselves, the Decadents) as the latest and most exciting innovators in literature. But it is the right method for defining Poe's greatest poem since he is the first of the Symbolists or, as I should prefer to call him, the first of the Decadents.

That may or may not have been a good thing to be. But in *Ulalume* we find at their height the qualities which entitle Poe to the description. And no one will deny that its mysterious images and phrases, its changing rhythms, its re-echoing rhymes, do gradually produce a single effect in the mind of the reader, culminating in the realisation of an inexplicable but unescapable despair with:

Thus I pacified Psyche and kissed her,  
And tempted her out of her gloom—  
And conquered her scruples and gloom;  
And we passed to the end of a vista,  
But were stopped by the door of a tomb—  
By the door of a legended tomb;  
And I said—"What is written, sweet sister,  
On the door of this legended tomb?"  
She replied—"Ulalume—Ulalume!—  
'Tis the vault of thy lost Ulalume!"

Then my heart it grew ashen and sober  
As the leaves that were crispéd and sere—  
As the leaves that were withering and sere;

And I cried—"It was surely October  
On *this* very night of last year  
That I journeyed—I journeyed down here!—  
That I brought a dread burden down here—  
On this night of all nights in the year,  
Ah, what demon hath tempted me here?  
Well I know, now, this dim lake of Auber—  
This misty mid region of Weir—  
Well I know, now, this dank tarn of Auber—  
This ghoul-haunted woodland of Weir."

Now one of the characteristics of the Decadent Movement, of which, as I contend, Poe was the effective initiator, was its literary colour. It was a turning, for quite comprehensible reasons which I shall have to discuss later, from life to art. There was a deep and sincere meaning in Villiers de l'Isle Adam's "As for living, our servants will do that for us". Poets have before proclaimed that their own activities were not given a sufficiently important place in the total of life's activities or even that they were more important than all the rest together. It was left to the Decadents to range themselves and their poetry on one side and life on the other and to say that they and their poetry were more important.

That declaration, with all its implications, constitutes an historical phenomenon, which must for the moment be passed over. What concerns us here is that the poet of Poe's sort depends for the medium in which he works on other poetry. The colours with which he paints are a distillation of the work of other writers. He has emotions of his own to express but the images through which he expresses them are not drawn direct from nature. The words he uses are so used as to make the most of the traces left on them by their having been used by others.

There is nothing derogatory to Poe's poetry in this description of it, any more than there is to Coleridge's poetry in Professor Lowes's analysis of the sources of the imagery in the *Ancient Mariner*. Coleridge himself indeed was another poet of the same sort. One might without excessive improbability trace the origins of the Decadence still further back to him, and it was perhaps only accident that prevented him from becoming the great exemplar that Poe afterwards became.

"The half-brained creature", says Swinburne, "to whom books are other than living things may see with the eyes of a bat and draw with the fingers of a mole his dullard's distinction between books and life: those who live the life of a higher animal than he know that books are to poets as much part of that life as pictures are to painters or music to musicians, dead matter though they may be to the spiritually still-born children of dirt and dullness who find it possible and natural to live while dead in heart and brain." Swinburne was a bookish poet of a different sort from that of Coleridge and Poe. He was often moved to poetry directly by books or figures in books, while they distilled from books the materials for the expression of emotions otherwise occasioned.

But Poe was handicapped by the fact that, if one may express it so brutally, he was little more than half-educated. Coleridge, while still a young man, remarked that he had read almost everything. Poe quotes a great many authors but they are not always the best and there is no convincing evidence that he had read very much of any of them. It is his defect as a critic that he seems to have no standards of comparison adequate to save him from extravagant praise of very

bad work. That defect plays its part in his work as a poet. He distilled the medium for the expression of his emotions from a mass of impure material.

Hence the faults of taste in all directions with which his work is disfigured. The poet who deals in associations is helplessly at the mercy of false associations in his own mind. Thus, in *The Raven*, when he wants to suggest sadness in a luxuriously melancholy setting, he gives us an idea, definite enough to be jarring, of the sort of room which is described in even more horrible detail in *The Philosophy of Furniture*. The purple curtains and the cushions with "velvet violet lining" are touches as clearly indicative of inferior materials as a blackening red in a picture. We have the same thing again, in a different way, in *Lenore*, which is a substantially beautiful poem, with the nobility of:

Come, let the burial rite be read—the funeral song be sung!—  
An anthem for the queenliest dead that ever died so young—  
A dirge for her the doubly dead in that she died so young.

But this piece contains also "Guy de Vere" and the lines:

The sweet Lenore hath "gone before", with Hope that flew  
beside,  
Leaving thee wild for the dear child that should have been  
thy bride—

The reader of the poetry indeed has a perpetual sense of insecurity. He is moving through a mysterious landscape, like none he has ever seen before, his nerves stretched to the tightest, when suddenly he realises that the scenery immediately under his eyes is only paint and canvas and not good paint or canvas at that. But the landscape is not all from the scene-painter's studio. And those parts of it which are not proclaim their

authenticity the more convincingly the more closely they are contemplated. So:

By a route obscure and lonely,  
Haunted by ill angels only,  
Where an Eidolon, named NIGHT,  
On a black throne reigns upright,  
I have reached these lands but newly  
From an ultimate dim Thule—  
From a wild weird clime that lieth, sublime,  
Out of Space—out of Time ;

and the strange watery picture of *The City in the Sea* with its uninterpretable ending and its “time-eaten towers that tremble not” and the

shadowy long-forgotten bowers  
Of sculptured ivy and stone flowers—  
Up many and many a marvellous shrine  
Whose wreathed friezes intertwine  
The viol, the violet, and the vine.

There was a world of strange landscapes in Poe’s mind. He had little time or peace for painting it and when he tried to do so the pigments he used were often faulty. But he did enough to show us its strangeness, to prove it his own, and to entice others to enter it.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE STORIES

POE's work in prose is much less fragmentary, unsatisfactory, tantalising, than his work in verse. He wrote sixty-four known pieces<sup>1</sup> which are usually classified as short stories (some of them can only with difficulty be fitted into this category) and two long stories which must be classified as novels, though neither was ever finished.

Some of this work naturally suffers from the same faults as the verse, and more, as might have been expected, is hackwork pure and simple. Some also is degraded in style, thought and tone and is rather disagreeable to read. But there is here a general sense of achievement commensurate with the author's intentions. The critic has less often to speak of glimpses and imperfect realisations. In the field of verse Poe was not often a master and hardly ever for more than a page or so at a time. He had a vision but he could not fully express it. He was, however, a master of the short story. On several occasions he succeeded in using this medium so as to say perfectly what he had to say. In the field of verse, it was his vision rather

<sup>1</sup> It is highly probable that there are more which would be revealed by research among the files of the magazines of his time—but it is doubtful whether such research would be worth while.



than his expression of it which influenced other men. In the field of prose his influence has been potent over men with quite other visions than his.

The remark has often been made that he was the father of the modern short story, and it is true that there is no magazine published to-day which would be quite the same if Poe had never lived. It is equally true that he *invented* nothing. The detective story, as Miss Dorothy L. Sayers has reminded us, began in the Bible. Poe found the macabre already in existence among the Germans and their imitators. The scientific (or pseudo-scientific) fantasy goes back as far as Cyrano de Bergerac—or Lucian, perhaps. But Poe brought each of these forms a decisive step nearer to practical and popular perfection. He made an enormous advance in technique and devised an effective method of telling a story within the space of three to five thousand words. Perhaps it would be better to say that he was the first writer fully to understand that within these limits there is no room for waste. The narrator must aim at a single effect and everything he introduces into his tale must have a bearing on it. The novel may be a panorama which the eye can take in, little by little, as it is unrolled. But the reader of a short story must feel at the end that he has seen a single picture in one instant of time. Before Poe the writers of short stories simply gave their readers panoramas which did not take very long to unroll. He first (I speak of course in general terms) found a way of leaving the reader with the impression that he has seen everything in a flash. At his best he did this without sacrificing the effect of suspense which, at a first reading, should move from page to page and which, once so established, is indelibly fixed in the reader's memory.

We may say, perhaps, that talent, opportunity and necessity conspired to make him a master. He was obliged to write what the magazines would print. There was no hope for him in publishing books, save in so far as they advertised his powers as a writer of magazine stories. No edition of those tales with which everyone is now familiar ever brought him more than a few complimentary copies. But stories printed in the magazines either brought him in a few dollars or else went towards the tally of pages which, under contract, he was obliged to provide in addition to his editorial services. He could write them, as he could not write poetry, in the consciousness that time spent on them was time virtuously spent in the endeavour to earn his living. This is clearly what he meant, or a part of what he meant, when he said that circumstances had prevented him from making any serious effort in what would otherwise have been the field of his choice.

We cannot doubt, then, that much which would otherwise have taken the form of verse went into his prose fiction. But, while he became perforce a hack, he was unable to alter the character, and sometimes the disagreeable character, of what he wrote. But it is not to be supposed that only poverty made him a writer of prose. The mind capable of conceiving *The Pit and the Pendulum* and the *MS. found in a Bottle* could hardly have abstained from writing them, and it is difficult to think that he could have written them otherwise than as he did.

It is indeed not always possible to distinguish between what he wrote genuinely against the grain and what he may have genuinely believed to be good work. It is quite likely that the macabre of *Thou Art the*

*Man* was as satisfactory to him as the macabre of *The Black Cat*. I have an ineradicable suspicion that he thought rather highly of the nauseating buffooneries of such a tale as *The Spectacles*. This is of some length and seems to have been written with care. The theme is the vanity of a short-sighted young man who refuses to wear glasses because that would be an admission of his infirmity. He is tricked into believing his great-great-grandmother to be a young and beautiful woman and into going through a ceremony of marriage with her. Immediately afterwards she insists on his wearing a pair of spectacles and with their help he discovers her to be bald, toothless and generally ravaged by age in a manner no detail of which is withheld from the reader.

It is a curious fact that Poe, the most humourless of men, considered himself to have the gifts of the humorist. There is another tale, which also bears marks both of care and complacency in the writing, called *Loss of Breath*. The note of this is that note of fantastic exaggeration which later writers were to make us consider distinctively "American". But it has none of the geniality of Mark Twain. The hero, abusing his wife on the morning after their wedding ("Thou wretch!—thou vixen!—thou shrew! . . . thou witch!—thou hag!" and so forth), loses his breath in a literal sense. He searches for it in the room where the quarrel has taken place but without success:

Long and earnestly did I continue the investigation: but the contemptible reward of my industry and perseverance proved to be only a set of false teeth, two pair of hips, an eye, and a number of *bullets-doux* from Mr. Windenough to my wife.

He then resolves to hide his unfortunate condition

in a foreign country but in the coach he is "placed between two gentlemen of colossal dimensions" while a third sits on him. At the end of the journey he is discovered to be unable to move ("all my limbs were dislocated and my head twisted on one side") and is taken for dead:

Hereupon all, one after another (there were nine in company), believed it their duty to pull me by the ear. A young practising physician, too, having applied a pocket-mirror to my mouth, and found me without breath, the assertion of my prosecutor was pronounced a true bill; and the whole party expressed a determination to endure tamely no such impositions for the future, and to proceed no farther with any such carcasses for the present.

I was here, accordingly, thrown out at the sign of the "Crow" (by which tavern the coach happened to be passing), without meeting with any further accident than the breaking of both my arms, under the left hind wheel of the vehicle. I must besides do the driver the justice to state that he did not forget to throw after me the largest of my trunks, which, unfortunately falling on my head, fractured my skull in a manner at once interesting and extraordinary.

We need not pursue Mr. Lackobreath (for that is the name that Poe so exquisitely gives him) minutely through his further adventures. They include his being hanged and coffined, together with some diverting experiences in a mortuary, where he encounters the corpse of Mr. Windenough. The point to be noticed is that this sort of thing cannot be dismissed as pure hackwork. Poe did not write it perfunctorily to fill up a few pages in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, where *Loss of Breath* first appeared, but lovingly, with gusto, as though he enjoyed writing it and thought well of it. It is a fair guess that to Poe the result was laughable.

This is indeed the material that Poe chooses when

he wants to laugh or to make his readers laugh. (There is another comic piece, called *The Man who was Used Up*, in which he side-splittingly describes the morning toilette of an old soldier, who has fought against the Indians and has lost a leg, an arm, an eye, scalp, teeth, palate, tongue and other parts of his body. The humour consists in the way in which his servant builds up a recognisable figure out of something which the narrator has not at first seen to be a human being.) These stories must, I think, be reckoned his worst, but it is a certain power, a certain conviction, not any feebleness, which gives them that bad eminence. They display very strikingly one side of the remoteness from humanity which must always be a part of our final picture of Poe. He was especially remote from the normal world in the ordinarily companionable pleasure of laughter. His cachinnations over his own jests sound like the merriment of the ghouls he was so fond of invoking in his poems. But, while ghoulish laughter can deepen the sense of horror when it intrudes upon a comprehensibly human tragedy, it is less effective when it is the accompaniment to a purely ghoulish comedy. It frightens us only when it introduces a clash of standards, when we feel that the ghouls are laughing at something which would move human beings to terror and pity. The ghouls in their own world, indulging in their own peculiar horseplay of misfortune and mutilation, are merely alien to us. What gives Poe his singular power of blood-chilling suggestion is his singular power of moving on the borderland between the two worlds.

The traces of genuine hackwork in the stories are of a quite different order. It is unnecessary to go far into such miserable stuff as *X-ing a Paragrab*, *Lionizing* and

*The Business Man.* We must look for it in work of a more ambitious order than this and we can find it in the padding which disfigures many of the stories. Yet even here there is much that is characteristic, especially the author's almost pathetic desire to display the breadth of his learning. *The Man of the Crowd* opens with a motto from La Bruyère, a German phrase, a Greek phrase, and a reference to "the vivid yet candid reason of Leibnitz, the mad and flimsy rhetoric of Gorgias". Later in the same piece, when Poe has occasion to describe the colours of the night, he says that "all was dark yet splendid—as that ebony to which has been likened the style of Tertullian"—a simile for which one would have liked to be able to invent the epithet "far-fetched". *The Island of the Fay* begins with a motto from Servius and a quotation from Marmontel, mentions in passing something that was said by Pomponius Mela, cites Balzac on Zimmermann and gives a line in Latin as the origin of a trope in the text. These pieces, and a few more like them, do seem, on internal evidence, to have been written mainly to fill a few pages in the magazines in which they appeared. They are dull and listless in manner and give little indication that their author took any pleasure or felt any pride in them. The display of erudition suggests an attempt to save his self-respect: if he could not impress the reader with the power of his imagination, then his memory for quotations must serve instead.

But the tales which were written without any genuine desire to write them for their own sake are not many. Poe may have turned into this channel a certain amount of creative force which he would have preferred to expend on the writing of verse. It is

impossible, however, to believe that no matter what leisure he might have enjoyed he could have abjured the writing of prose. We should be obliged to reckon him as a narrator of superb natural talents even if none of his stories had ever kept up the level of his best openings.

I was sick—sick unto death with that long agony; and when they at length unbound me, and I was permitted to sit, I felt that my senses were leaving me. The sentence—the dread sentence of death—was the last of distinct accentuation which reached my ears.

*(The Pit and the Pendulum)*

The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could, but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge. You, who so well know the nature of my soul, will not suppose, however, that I gave utterance to a threat. *At length* I would be avenged; this was a point definitively settled—but the very definitiveness with which it was resolved, precluded the idea of risk. I must not only punish, but punish with impunity. A wrong is unredressed when retribution overtakes its redresser. It is equally unredressed when the avenger fails to make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong.

*(The Cask of Amontillado)*

During the whole of a dull, dark, and resoundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country, and at length found myself, as the shades of evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher. I know not how it was—but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit. I say insufferable; for the feeling was unrelieved by any of that half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment, with which the mind usually receives even the sternest natural images of the desolate or terrible. I looked upon the scene before me—

upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain—upon the bleak walls—upon the vacant eye-like windows—upon a few rank sedges—and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees—with an utter depression of soul, which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveller upon opium—the bitter lapse into everyday life—the hideous dropping of the veil.

*(The Fall of the House of Usher)*

Each of these beginnings sets the stage with rapidity and decision, and fills it with atmosphere—in the first the horror of the Inquisition; in the second the vengeful madness, made more terrible by its lucidity, in the mind of Montresor; in the third the sickness of the doom hanging over the House of Usher.

Nor, though Poe adapted his narrative gift magnificently to the requirements of the short story as he first conceived them, did he confine it to that form. I am aware that there is an inclination among modern critics to think rather poorly of *Arthur Gordon Pym*. I fancy that the book has not been read much lately except by those who do not read to write afterwards. It seems to me to be a fine example of the class to which it primarily belongs—a story of adventure at sea, direct, forceful, rapidly moving and exciting, with that extraordinary conclusion, or want of conclusion, which lifts it out of its own class altogether.

It is very hard to avoid the view that it had some obscure connection with something deep in Poe's mind, deeper, probably, than he himself ever knew. As we have seen, in his last delirium he imagined himself to be, like Pym, dying of thirst, and called repeatedly on Pym's friend to deliver him. Unquestionably it is full of more obvious autobiographical details, reminiscences



of his two Atlantic crossings and of sailing on the James River. Unquestionably, too, the suggested relations between Pym and his grandfather present us with a version of the relations between Poe and John Allan and contain a renewed hint that Allan had promised to make his adopted son also his heir.

Further—there is a syllabic parallelism between the names “Edgar Allan Poe” and “Arthur Gordon Pym” which it is not entirely fanciful to take as having satisfied something in Poe’s mind. How far the parallelism went in his mind no amount of guesswork will ever enable us to determine. But such a parallelism there was, whether it was conscious or almost wholly unconscious, and it may be that if we could read the symbols accurately we should have here something in the nature of a spiritual autobiography under the delusive guise of a simple story of adventure.

Let us, for the moment, consider the story purely on its surface merits. The escapade which Poe describes in the first chapter as a specimen of his early life may derive its vigour from being factually autobiographical. After a party at which both Arthur and Augustus, his friend, have made themselves “not a little intoxicated”, Augustus persuades Arthur to “go out on a frolic with the boat”. They set off accordingly in a fresh south-west wind out of the harbour of Nantucket:

I now asked my companion what course he intended to steer, and what time he thought it probable we should get back. He whistled for a few minutes, and then said crustily: “I am going to sea—you may go home if you think proper”. Turning my eyes upon him, I perceived at once that, in spite of his assumed *nonchalance*, he was greatly agitated. I could see him distinctly by the light of the moon—his face was paler than any marble, and his hand shook so excess-

ively that he could scarcely retain hold of the tiller. I found that something had gone wrong, and became seriously alarmed. At this period I knew little about the management of a boat, and was now depending entirely upon the nautical skill of my friend. The wind, too, had suddenly increased, and we were fast getting out of the lee of the land—still I was ashamed to betray my trepidation, and for almost half an hour maintained a resolute silence. I could stand it no longer, however, and spoke to Augustus about the propriety of turning back. As before, it was nearly a minute before he made answer, or took any notice of my suggestion. “By and by,” said he at length—“time enough—home by and by.” I had expected such a reply, but there was something in the tone of these words which filled me with an indescribable feeling of dread. I again looked at the speaker attentively. His lips were perfectly livid, and his knees shook so violently together that he seemed scarcely able to stand. “For God’s sake, Augustus,” I screamed, now heartily frightened, “what ails you?—what is the matter?—what *are* you going to do?” “Matter!” he stammered, in the greatest apparent surprise, letting go the tiller at the same moment, and falling forward into the bottom of the boat—“matter—why, nothing is the—matter—going home—d-d-don’t you see?” The whole truth now flashed upon me. I flew to him and raised him up. He was drunk—beastly drunk—he could no longer either stand, speak or see. His eyes were perfectly glazed; and as I let him go in the extremity of my despair, he rolled like a mere log into the bilgewater, from which I had lifted him.

This might, I say, very well be founded on some youthful experience of Poe’s own. Whencesoever it may come, it could hardly be bettered in its own sort and it is an excellent example of the direct and lively manner of the greater part of this book. And the next stage in Arthur’s adventures, his running away to sea as a stow-away, with Augustus’s connivance, in a ship commanded by Augustus’s father, may have some remote relation with Poe’s flight from Allan’s house—though in that

there was no need to elude Allan's vigilance. It was more probably a reflection of earlier moods when he had thought of thus escaping from an intolerable position and had flattered himself that he might be regretted.

From this point at any rate the author's invention indubitably begins. Arthur is concealed in the after-hold until the ship shall be well out at sea. He is provided with all the conveniences and comforts possible in such a situation, including several books. One of these, it is interesting to notice, was the account of the journey of Lewis and Clarke to the mouth of the Columbia, which furnished Poe with material for his other extended romance, the *Journal of Julius Rodman*. Arthur lies hidden, waiting for the ship to sail, for three days before Augustus finds opportunity to pay him a hasty visit. Shortly after, he perceives that they are at sea at last and falls asleep, waking to realise, from the condition of the food which has been left with him, that he has slept for a very long time.

It would be vain to attempt to summarise the account of that nightmare existence in the after-hold which follows. It anticipates *The Pit and the Pendulum* in its depiction of agonies suffered and of the agonising efforts of the victim to remain alive. Arthur leaves his shelter and, in the darkness, is unable to find his way back to it. He is near to perishing of hunger and thirst. He engages in a deadly struggle with his dog, which has been introduced into the ship as a companion for him and which has gone mad. He finds a letter left for him by Augustus and hits upon the idea of making it luminous by rubbing it with phosphorus from his spoilt matches. He thus succeeds in reading a few vague but terrifying words.

The accumulation of horrors in this part of the book would be ludicrous were not each succeeding horror described with so much force. The continuation of the story goes beyond anything that could be expected from a normal mind. Poe searches among his memories of nautical disaster for frightful details and makes of them an undoubtedly morbid but none the less an effective compound. Arthur emerges to find the ship in the hands of mutineers who have massacred the captain and most of the loyal members of the crew. The mutineers split into two parties and there is a renewed struggle with more slaughter. A storm follows, leaving the vessel waterlogged and helpless, with but four survivors aboard.

They sight another vessel and signal for help:

The brig was within fifty feet of us, and it seemed to be her intention to run under our counter, that we might board her without putting out a boat. We rushed aft, when, suddenly, a wide yaw threw her off full five or six points from the course she had been running, and, as she passed under our stern at the distance of about twenty feet, we had a full view of her decks. Shall I ever forget the triple horror of that spectacle? Twenty-five or thirty human bodies, among whom were several females, lay scattered about between the counter and the galley in the last and most loathsome state of putrefaction. We plainly saw that not a soul lived in that fated vessel! Yet we could not help shouting to the dead for help! Yes, long and loudly did we beg, in the agony of the moment, that those silent and disgusting images would stay for us, would not abandon us to become like them, would receive us among their goodly company! We were raving with horror and despair—thoroughly mad through the anguish of our grievous disappointment.

We need not go in detail into the episode of cannibalism

which lasted, as Arthur tells us in a curious phrase, "for four ever memorable days". After this, things mend a little and the remaining three (the fourth having been eaten) are picked up by "the *Jane Guy*, of Liverpool, Captain Guy, bound on a sealing and trading voyage to the South Seas and Pacific".

It is highly probable that Poe could have produced from his reading authentication of every pang which he inflicts on the reader of this singular story, perhaps even justification for this particular succession of pangs. Worse things may have happened at sea. But one is left asking why the writer of a magazine serial should so resolutely have selected all the worst he could find and, still more, how he could contrive so to breathe reality into his fictitious selection. We are not here in the presence of any merely mechanical aggregation of horror.

It seems to me that the surprising vividness and dramatic force of this narrative have been overlooked, or too much taken for granted, by most of Poe's critics. It seems to me also that they can be explained if we suppose that its events are, as it were, transmutations, on different levels, of events in his own life. The book with which I feel most inclined to compare it is *Robinson Crusoe*. There is in both the same detailed description of adventures which the author has never experienced and in both the same realistic restraint. The horrors in *Arthur Gordon Pym* have no fantastic character, nor does any fantastic atmosphere accompany them. They are, and the reader continuously feels that they are, such things as might actually have happened. Poe does not, throughout the bulk of his story, any more than Defoe, fall into the extravagances which might be expected from

a writer describing things he has never seen: on the contrary, his tone is pitched rather low.

Where, at the end of the story, the symbolism changes its nature, it does so, as I guess, because the author had recorded a mental voyage which had brought him to the edge of the unknown and to a point where he must find a new set of terms for what he tremblingly descried beyond that edge. No one can pretend that *Pym*, whether its unfinished state was intentional or not, has any obvious shape or purpose as a story. The suggestions made in the last chapters are too mysterious and too tremendous to be merely appendages to the realistic story of adventure which precedes them. That story is too long and too rich in detail to be merely a prelude to those strange discoveries amid the Antarctic ice. The whole work is condemnable on every principle of the mechanics of fiction. Nevertheless it is alive and readable.

I do not for one moment suggest that when Poe wrote it he deliberately set out to compose an allegorical or disguised account of his own life and misfortunes. For the intention uppermost in his mind we need not look further than the obvious facts. He was under contract to supply so many pages of matter in each number of a magazine. He wanted to write a novel, for all the various reasons that do make people want to write novels. No doubt, on purely material grounds, he hoped that it would be easier to secure publication for it in volume form than for a collection of short stories and also that it would be more successful when it was published. Short stories had been very disappointing.

But, when he had determined to write such a book, he drew, consciously or unconsciously, for the driving

emotion of it, on the events of his own life. *Robinson Crusoe*, it is interesting to remember, has been explained as Defoe's record of a period of estrangement from his wife, during which he refused to speak to her and lived, at any rate in a symbolical sense, the life of a solitary. It would be absurd to press that fact (if it is a fact), as it has been pressed, into an assertion that Defoe wrote *Robinson Crusoe* wholly or mainly for the purpose of making such a record. But it would be quite possible to believe that he brought the emotions of some such experience into service and with their help gave the story of his castaway an intensity beyond that of anything else he ever wrote. So, if in a lesser degree, with Poe and *Arthur Gordon Pym*. This account of imaginary experiences and sufferings has something like the vividness of autobiography.

The impression is not diminished in those last pages in which realism turns to frank fantasy. If we regard the book simply as entertaining fiction, the end of it is disappointingly dishonest. Pym speaks of "that vast chain of apparent miracles in which I was destined to be at length completely encircled". But he shows us no more than a few links in the chain and they are no more than marvels in the air, unrelated and unexplained, like the water of which Pym says:

Upon collecting a basinful, and allowing it to settle thoroughly, we perceived that the whole mass of liquid was made up of a number of distinct veins, each of a distinct hue; that these veins did not commingle; and that their cohesion was perfect in regard to neighbouring veins.

When we are beginning to look forward to seeing the marvels fall into place in a coherent if fantastic picture the book abruptly stops and we are fobbed off with a

reference to "the late sudden and distressing death of Mr. Pym" before he could write the last chapters.

There is more in this, however, than the mere failure of an author to live up to the expectations he has excited. The editor of one edition in my possession (I quote this to show what Poe has suffered at the hands of editors and publishers) volunteers the explanation that "Poe refused to finish this tale because of the inaccuracy of the facts supplied to him". (This is, I should fancy, traditional. Much in many of the current editions of Poe is ascribable to tradition—bad tradition.)

But the truth is at once simple and significant. Poe wrote no more, because he knew no more: the story had not yet reached its end, though the end had already cast its shadow backwards. The last entry in Pym's diary runs as follows:

*March 22d.*—The darkness had materially increased, relieved only by the glare of the water thrown back from the white curtains before us. Many gigantic and pallidly white birds flew continuously now from beyond the veil, and their scream was the eternal *Tekelili!* as they retreated from our vision. Hereupon Nu-Nu stirred in the bottom of the boat; but upon touching him, we found his spirit departed. And now we rushed into the embraces of the cataract, where a chasm threw itself open to receive us. But there arose in our pathway a shrouded human figure, very far larger in its proportions than any dweller among men. And the hue of the skin of the figure was of the perfect whiteness of the snow.

The image of the rushing boat is suggestive and it is tempting to compare its occurrence here with its frequent occurrences in the poetry of Shelley. But it is enough to say that it is characteristic of certain morbidly exalted conditions of the nerves. When Poe finished *Arthur Gordon Pym* (or, rather, stopped writing



it) he was conscious that, after many and cruel misfortunes, he was hurrying into an awful obscurity, able only to guess at its nature, helpless to save himself from it.

The sea, which is the constant background of *Arthur Gordon Pym*, plays a great part in Poe's earlier prose, though, curiously enough, it does not appear in his poetry in a significant way at all. The best of the stories which he submitted for the prize offered by the *Baltimore Saturday Visitor* in 1833 was the *MS. found in a Bottle*. Of this Joseph Conrad spoke as "E. A. Poe's impressive version of the Flying Dutchman. . . . A very fine piece of work—about as fine as anything of that kind can be—and so authentic in detail that it might have been told by a sailor of a sombre and poetical genius in the invention of the phantastic."

It has all the appearance of being founded on a legend of the sea, though it departs rather widely from that of the Flying Dutchman, but it has about it that atmosphere of the inexplicably terrible which belongs to Poe, and to a few other authors, and to the anonymous creators of legends. The misfortunes of the voyager recall those of Pym told in less detail. He is characteristically gloomy and, still characteristically, for no stated cause. (Poe's heroes rarely own to any material reason for their moodiness.) After many years of wandering about the world, he embarks at Batavia in a vessel which is overtaken by a simoon. The description of the storm, taken of course from Poe's reading, fully bears out Conrad's compliment to the story's authenticity. It leaves the narrator and a Swedish sailor tossing in a dismasted helpless vessel on a convulsed sea. Five days pass thus, and then comes the first touch of the *terribilità* which the story is to develop:

We waited in vain for the arrival of the sixth day—that day to me has not yet arrived—to the Swede never did arrive.

The strangeness of that statement prepares the reader for the events thereafter to be transacted in darkness, the arrival of the giant ship into the rigging of which the narrator is thrown, the voyage among a crew which appears to be oblivious of him, so that he can walk into the captain's presence and there see how:

The cabin floor was thickly strewn with strange, iron-clasped folios and mouldering instruments of science, and obsolete, long-forgotten charts. His head was bowed down upon his hands, and he pored, with a fiery, unquiet eye, over a paper which I took to be a commission, and which, at all events, bore the signature of a monarch. He murmured to himself—as did the first seaman whom I saw in the hold—some low peevish syllables of a foreign tongue; and although the speaker was close at my elbow, his voice seemed to reach my ears from the distance of a mile.

It is to be observed that this very extraordinary story leads to no explanation. Poe may have been influenced, as Conrad suggests, by the legend of the Flying Dutchman. This view receives some support from the fact that, as the ship approaches the abyss:

The crew pace the deck with unquiet and tremulous step; but there is upon their countenance an expression more of the eagerness of hope than the darkness of despair.

But, if there is a curse upon the ship, Poe tells us nothing about it. The narrator suggests only the immense age of the crew, the immense size of the vessel and the porousness of its timbers, as though it had sailed in that sea “where the ship itself will grow in bulk like the living body of the seamen”. And at the end we have the

image of the boat hurried by an uncontrollable power—to who knows what? The whole is rather a picture than a tale, a composition in different shades of darkness, in different tones of horror. At the end the reader is conscious less of having heard narrated a succession of events than of having seen or felt the presentation of a state of mind.

The *MS. found in a Bottle* is the first of a series of pieces which stand out from the rest of Poe's work as having been written to produce this effect. But before we follow this series to its climax we must consider his prose stories in other kinds.

The sapient gentlemen who awarded a prize to that masterpiece (and it is to be put to their credit that they listened while all the *Tales of the Folio Club* were read aloud to them, interrupting only to cry "Excellent!" or "Capital!") were at one time inclined to prefer *A Descent into the Maelstrom*. If they had done so, it would have been hard to blame them. They would merely have been ranging themselves on the side of that large public which Poe has now for a hundred years succeeded in pleasing without bringing his highest poetic powers into the game. Poe has always been a popular writer and the cause of popularity in others. It was only the bad luck of the date of his birth which prevented him from making the income made until recently by scores of efficient writers for American magazines—more, that is to say, very much more, in a year than Poe ever earned in the whole of his life.<sup>1</sup>

When it came to writing for magazines, just as when

<sup>1</sup> If we estimated the total sum of money that passed through his hands, earnings and loans and all, at £3000 we should probably be erring on the generous side.

it came to editing them, Poe was able to be as efficient as though he had never visited the misty mid-region of Weir or been carried in a boat rushing towards the abyss. The *Descent* has indeed a boat rushing into the abyss but it brings it safely out again. It reduces the whole of that mysterious and terrifying image to the level of good, vigorous journalism. It is fine, descriptive reporting by a man who has not seen what he has reported but has been able to imagine it visually from the accounts of others. One is a little reminded of what Mr. Kipling tells us of the sinking of a ship in a still sea (*The Finest Story in the World*), but Mr. Kipling does it better. There remains the possibility that, but for Poe, he would not have done it even as well.

Much of Poe's best work, a great deal of that part of it with which his name is most often associated, must, in the last resort, be judged on that level. If I had to arrange his stories in the order in which they are best known to the large reading public, I should, I think, put *The Gold Bug* first, *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* second, *The Pit and the Pendulum* third, and *The Fall of the House of Usher* only fourth. This is, of course, mere guesswork but it presents something like a picture of the facts. From Poe there proceeded two streams of influence, one upon writers who cared for popularity as little as he would have wished to care for it and one upon writers who desired popularity as much as he needed it.

It would be very easy to be superior in distinguishing between the two. But Poe's work in the lower order has a value that forbids any display of superiority. It would be hard to believe that any development in the literary art has had such a numerous progeny as have his detective stories through Gaboriau and Conan

Doyle. Sherlock Holmes, it is true, jeered at the Chevalier Auguste Dupin early in his career, but quite certainly he would not have been what he was had Dupin never been invented, and Conan Doyle himself made proper acknowledgements of the debt. Gaboriau, when a young man, was stimulated by the early French translations of Poe to work in the same kind.

To-day the brood of Dupin walks abroad in a thousand books a year. It was Poe who established what seems now to be almost the strongest convention of this *genre*—the necessity for the detective to have a companion who is impressed, bewildered and finally enlightened by his friend. A very simple device once it has been devised—but it was of Poe's devising. To him too may be traced the method of opening the story with a little episode, complete in itself, in which the detective's powers are revealed, so preparing the reader to be receptive of the greater wonders which follow. Thus, at his first appearance in the *Murders in the Rue Morgue*, Dupin answers the unspoken thought of his friend and then explains the process by which he had followed his train of reflections.

These facts are worth mentioning here because they show that Poe had a natural genius for the mechanics of the short story. Had he done no more, he would have made a most important contribution to this branch of the art of entertaining the reader. But the detective stories, apart from their value as entertainment and apart from their place in the development of a literary form, demand our attention as characteristic of one side of Poe's mind and nature. They illustrate very characteristically his consuming desire to demonstrate his superiority over others. It was displayed in his articles

on cryptograms in which he undertook to read any ciphered message based on a key-phrase which might be "in French, Italian, Spanish, German, Latin or Greek (or in any of the dialects of these languages)". Whether he could have kept his word if he had been tested by an expert maker of ciphers is a doubtful matter. He gave a *bravura* display of his skill in reading a cipher submitted to him by an anonymous correspondent. But his analysis of methods, though it would, I think, be considered rather elementary by a modern expert, shows the reasoning powers of which he was proud.

They are shown in a more spectacular manner in the feats of Dupin, and Poe, one cannot question, "sees himself" as that character. It is Poe who, when the Prefect of Police says that he would willingly pay fifty thousand francs to anyone who would assist him in the recovery of the purloined letter, replies, "In that case you may as well fill me up a cheque for the amount mentioned. When you have signed it, I will hand you the letter." This was such a triumph as Poe would dearly have loved to enjoy in real life: he managed to enjoy it vicariously in the person of Dupin. The world should see of what his mind was capable when he was freed from the accidents that beset him. It did see and made use of what it saw. It was a pity that Poe could not have levied an anticipatory tax of, say, one per cent on the earnings of his most illustrious followers, some of whom have been paid for a single story almost as much as Poe earned during the whole of his life.

But such regrets are vain. What we have now to consider is the fact that Poe did not write merely what to-day we should call saleable magazine-stories but also

stories in which his astonishing grasp of technique came to the help of his peculiar imagination. His imagination *was* peculiar. All his greatest stories have a morbid taint in them—a taint of pain, disease and death, with something more than a hint of sadism. It is almost unbelievable that so restrained and conscious a technical mastery should be put to such a service. But *The Pit and the Pendulum* shows an astonishing management of effect in the presentation of events quite outside reality. There is not, so far as I know, any justification for saying that the Holy Inquisition was as ingenious in its tortures as Poe's unnamed hero represents it—no justification, I think, for saying that it ever inflicted any torture save that of the final fire on the condemned heretic. There is good ground for guessing that this tale is the rationalisation of a nightmare—possibly a nightmare induced by drugs, or by drink in highly excessive quantities.

But what a rationalisation!

Looking upward, [says Poe] I surveyed the ceiling of my prison. It was some thirty or forty feet overhead, and constructed much as the side walls. In one of its panels a very singular figure riveted my whole attention. It was the painted figure of Time as he is commonly represented, save that, in lieu of a scythe, he held what, at a casual glance, I supposed to be the pictured image of a huge pendulum, such as we see on antique clocks. There was something, however, in the appearance of this machine which caused me to regard it more attentively. While I gazed directly upward at it (for its position was immediately over my own) I fancied that I saw it in motion. In an instant afterward the fancy was confirmed. Its sweep was brief, and of course slow. I watched it for some minutes somewhat in fear, but more in wonder. Wearied at length with observing its dull movement, I turned my eyes upon the other objects in the cell.

A slight noise attracted my notice, and, looking to the floor, I saw several enormous rats traversing it. They had issued from the well which lay just within view to my right. Even then, while I gazed, they came up in troops, hurriedly, with ravenous eyes, allured by the scent of the meat. From this it required much effort and attention to scare them away.

It might have been half an hour, perhaps, even an hour (for I could take but imperfect note of time), before I again cast my eyes upward. What I then saw confounded and amazed me. The sweep of the pendulum had increased in extent by nearly a yard. As a natural consequence its velocity was also much greater. But what mainly disturbed me was the idea that it had perceptibly *descended*. I now observed—with what horror it is needless to say—that its nether extremity was formed of a crescent of glittering steel, about a foot in length from horn to horn; the horns upward, and the under edge evidently as keen as that of a razor. Like a razor also, it seemed massy and heavy, tapering from the edge into a solid and broad structure above. It was appended to a weighty rod of brass, and the whole *hissed* as it swung through the air.

I could no longer doubt the doom prepared for me by monkish ingenuity in torture.

It may have been a nightmare when it first entered Poe's mind, but when it leaves his pen it has shed all the inconsecutiveness, all the blurred edges, of the dreaming mind:

Notwithstanding its terrifically wide sweep (some thirty feet or more), and the hissing vigor of its descent, sufficient to sunder these very walls of iron, still the fraying of my robe would be all that, for several minutes, it would accomplish. And at this thought I paused. I dared not go further than this reflection. I dwelt upon it with a pertinacity of attention—as if, in so dwelling, I could arrest *here* the descent of the steel. I forced myself to ponder upon the sound of the crescent as it should pass across the garment—upon the peculiar thrilling sensation which the friction of cloth



produces on the nerves. I pondered upon all this frivolity until my teeth were on edge.

Down—steadily down it crept. I took a frenzied pleasure in contrasting its downward with its lateral velocity. To the right—to the left—far and wide with the shriek of a damned spirit! to my heart, with the stealthy pace of the tiger! I alternately laughed and howled, as the one or the other idea grew predominant.

Down—certainly, relentlessly down! It vibrated within three inches of my bosom! I struggled violently—furiously—to free my left arm. This was free only from the elbow to the hand. I could reach the latter, from the platter beside me, to my mouth, with great effort, but no farther. Could I have broken the fastenings above the elbow, I would have seized and attempted to arrest the pendulum. I might as well have attempted to arrest an avalanche!

The almost insanely logical side of Poe's mind has worked on the material supplied to it by the side which was, not to be too fine, as near insane as makes no matter. There are in him traces both of the sadist and the masochist, but there is no trace of any mental vagueness. Every horror is imagined with precision and described with economy.

The same is true of the shorter *Masque of the Red Death*, which is in its content sheer nightmare horror, but in form and execution the work of a supremely skillful and deliberate artificer. It begins, in the approved manner of the modern short story, so as at once to attract and retain the reader's attention—"The 'Red Death' had long devastated the country. No pestilence had ever been so fatal, or so hideous. Blood was its Avatar and its seal—the redness and the horror of blood." From the clangour of that first chord its intensity grows steadily to the end. There is one slight and silly fault of taste—when Poe, speaking of the

"glare and glitter and piquancy and phantasm" of Prince Prospero's masquerade, tells us that it had "much of what has since been seen in 'Hernani' ". With his own terrifying imagination in full sweep he had no need to use literary allusions to make his effect. But even this fault has no power to check the reader for more than a moment. The story moves with controlled but ever increasing speed to the climax when the Prince attempts to seize the intrusive masquerader who has assumed the likeness of the Plague and himself falls dead. After that there is for conclusion one brief but all-sufficient paragraph:

And now was acknowledged the presence of the Red Death. He had come like a thief in the night. And one by one dropped the revellers in the blood-bedewed halls of their revel, and died each in the despairing posture of his fall. And the life of the ebony clock went out with that of the last of the gay. And the flames of the tripods expired. And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all.

It is in the great short stories, not many over a dozen at most, that Poe makes his most convincing claim to be reckoned among the world's writers, not for what he tried to do or for his influence on others but for what he actually did. It is not a large body of work and in some ways it is strictly limited. It is not, like the stories of Tchekhov or Maupassant or Kipling, a reflection of exterior life. It contains no portraits of human beings, not even an anecdote of normal human conduct, only reflections of the moods and inner experiences of the writer.

Poe was not without the power to write outside these limitations. There is a certain degree of normal charac-

terisation in *Arthur Gordon Pym*, and Dupin and his associates converse in an ordinary way. But he could reach his greatest intensity only within them, where the persons and events of the story are symbols, not human beings or worldly occurrences, and where the whole is not a narrative but the presentation of a mood. *The Fall of the House of Usher* is nothing else.

The unnamed narrator suffers from an unexplained melancholy, his friend Roderick Usher from unformulated fears, the Lady Madeline from an undefined disease. The incidents of the story are nothing, even the entombment of the Lady Madeline while she is in a cataleptic trance. These are not Poe's subject. His subject is a mind in a state of upheaval, and the incidents, the material descriptions, are merely the clues he gives us to the successive stages of that mind's disintegration. The climax of the story consists of physical events:

As if in the superhuman energy of his utterance there had been found the potency of a spell, the huge antique panels to which the speaker pointed threw slowly back, upon the instant, their ponderous and ebony jaws. It was the work of the rushing gust—but then without those doors there *did* stand the lofty and enshrouded figure of the lady Madeline of Usher. There was blood upon her white robes, and the evidence of some bitter struggle upon every portion of her emaciated frame. For a moment she remained trembling and reeling to and fro upon the threshold—then, with a low moaning cry, fell heavily inward upon the person of her brother, and in her violent and now final death-agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had anticipated.

But the impression we have is not one of physical disaster or horror. What we feel is that the spirit of

Roderick Usher, so long threatened and reeling, has come to its final and irremediable overthrow. The image of his sister beating upon the lid of her coffin is only the terrifying shadow of a greater horror, a spiritual horror which we feel to be all the greater because it cannot be presented to us save thus, by a shadow.

*The Fall of the House of Usher* is to Poe's tales what *Ulalume* is to his poetry, though it is less nearly perfect in execution. No other tale quite makes this effect of shadows which, astounding as they are in themselves, suggest things more astounding but not to be described so explicitly. In other pieces, in *The Tell-tale Heart* and *William Wilson*, the ultimate horror, if not unveiled, is at least disclosed in glimpses—in one a definite probing of a psychological state, in the other something of an attempt at allegory.

*The Tell-tale Heart* is a story of mania. It is terse and simple. The narrator commits murder for the reason that one of his victim's eyes "resembled that of a vulture—a pale blue with a film over it". He conceals the body and destroys all traces and, when the searchers come, with an easy mind he bids them search. When they have done so and are satisfied, he begins to hear "a low, dull, quick sound—much such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton". He believes that it is the heart in the old man's body still beating where it is hidden under the boards and he is maddened to confession. This fantasia of conscience, conceived in terms of insanity, has its counterpart in *The Imp of the Perverse*, where the murderer finds himself involuntarily muttering at intervals "I am safe", and then "I am safe—I am safe—yes—if I be not fool enough to make open confession". From that utterance the perverse element

in his own mind drives him irresistibly to do what he most dreads. There is a recognisable, if not exact, echo of the same theme in *The Man of the Crowd*, the man whom Poe describes himself as following all night about the streets, whose face gives him "the ideas of vast mental power, of caution, of penuriousness, of avarice, of coolness, of malice, of blood-thirstiness, of triumph, of merriment, of excessive terror, of intense—of supreme terror" and of whom he at last concludes that "it will be in vain to follow; for I shall learn no more of him, nor of his deeds. The worst heart of the world is a grosser book than the *Hortulus Animae*, and perhaps it is but one of the great mercies of God that *es lässt sich nicht lesen*."

*William Wilson* is a more elaborate fantasia of conscience and one of Poe's more ambitious compositions. It presumably gave Wilde the germ of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. But here it is not a picture but a mysteriously living double which haunts the hero of the tale. The second William Wilson comes to the same school as the first, heightens and points a natural resemblance by deliberate mimicry, and deliberately sets himself to thwart his original. Later, this mysterious Doppelgänger appears on various occasions to the discomfiture and ruin of the narrator, who at last stabs him to death and hears him cry in dying:

"*You have conquered, and I yield. Yet henceforward art thou also dead—dead to the World, to Heaven, and to Hope! In me didst thou exist—and, in my death, see by this image, which is thine own, how utterly thou hast murdered thyself.*"

The allegory is that of an ill-doing man and his conscience. The machinery is less well contrived than that

of *Dorian Gray*, though some of the trappings ("to vie in profusion of expenditure with the haughtiest heirs of some of the wealthiest earldoms in Great Britain" and so forth) seem to us now hardly more dated. Wilde's story demands of us no more than acquiescence in a single assumption—that a picture *could* show the ravages of vices which should otherwise have taken effect on the face of the original. When he has accepted that, the reader has no questions to ask. With Poe's story he has many. Who was in fact this mysterious double who seems to be a projection of William Wilson's conscience or of his better self and yet somehow manages to be a perfectly material three-dimensional schoolboy at the same school?

The only answer to that question is that, if our minds persist in asking it, as they quite legitimately may, then for us the story is ultimately a failure in a sense that *Dorian Gray* is not. But it is part of Poe's characteristic quality that he does continually lead us into regions full of questions which cannot be answered. When he fails, it is because he has not established the atmosphere in which we do not remember, or do not dare, to ask them. There is a certain amount of realism about the background of *William Wilson*. Poe's biographers go to it, though with somewhat meagre results, for details of his school-life at Stoke Newington. There are topographical details which make it certain that he did not intend any exact description, but he did permit himself a pictorial precision which is not really in harmony with the true intention of the story, is in mere matter of length out of proportion with the rest of it and which therefore suggests itself as having been drawn from recollections of boyhood. The realistic description is good of its

sort, betraying perhaps its author's admiration for Dickens, as in this passage:

The house, I have said, was old and irregular. The grounds were extensive, and a high and solid brick wall, topped with a bed of mortar and broken glass, encompassed the whole. This prison-like rampart formed the limit of our domain; beyond it we saw but thrice a week—once every Saturday afternoon, when, attended by two ushers, we were permitted to take brief walks in a body through some of the neighbouring fields—and twice during Sunday, when we were paraded in the same formal manner to the morning and evening service in the one church in the village. Of this church the principal of our school was pastor. With how deep a spirit of wonder and perplexity was I wont to regard him from our remote pew in the gallery, as, with step solemn and slow, he ascended the pulpit! This reverend man, with countenance so demurely benign, with robes so glossy and so clerically flowing, with wig so minutely powdered, so rigid and so vast,—could this be he who, of late, with sour visage, and in snuffy habiliments, administered, ferule in hand, the Draconian Laws of the academy? Oh, gigantic paradox, too utterly monstrous for solution!

William Wilson's double, his identical image, bearing some mystical relation to him and his spiritual development, lived inside that same exactly specified wall, was paraded with him through the fields and to church. Poe has set the scene with skill and has then proceeded to enact a drama of a character which does not fit it. The story is realistic and mysterious by turns and on whichever plane it may be at the moment the reader is haunted and hindered by recollections of the other.

All these stories express in one way and another something that Poe felt, and felt very intensely, about himself. He had committed no murder, he had not indulged in the spectacular excesses of William Wilson.

But he had wasted his powers and given way to temptation and in so doing he had failed those whom he loved and who depended on him. He saw his own sins (he was essentially a humourless man) through the magnifying glass of remorse and oddly resembled one of his own characters who saw through a window an insect one-sixteenth of an inch in length crawling up a spider's web and thought it to be a horrifying monster "far larger than any ship of the line" romping over the distant hillside".

But the special power of his imagination is best revealed when it is least connected with any conscious or semi-conscious thought about himself and his own life, and here we return to *The Fall of the House of Usher*. There is no particular reason for the sick gloom which hangs over this story nor does the reader feel any compulsion to seek for a reason. Roderick Usher's remorse for having shut his sister alive in his tomb and for his strange weakness in failing to take action when he has realised what he has done is but the formal conclusion, not the mainspring of the piece. That inexplicable weakness, in its very inexplicability, is the mainspring:

"Not hear it?—yes, I hear it, and *have* heard it. Long—long—long—many minutes, many hours, many days, have I heard it—yet I dared not—oh, pity me, miserable wretch that I am!—I dared not—I *dared* not speak! *We have put her living in the tomb!* Said I not that my senses were acute? I *now* tell you that I heard her first feeble movement in the hollow coffin. I heard them—many, many days ago—yet I dared not—I *dared not speak!*"

The whole story is a picture in purely symbolic terms of the malady from which Poe felt himself to be suffering. What happens in the House of Usher is of less



importance than what the reader is made to feel during his brief sojourn there. It is remarkable that Poe embodies in the story his poem, *The Haunted Palace*, as it were a metaphor within a metaphor. It is ascribed to Roderick Usher, and the palace where:

Travellers now within that valley,  
Through the red-litten windows see  
Vast forms that move fantastically  
To a discordant melody;  
While, like a rapid ghastly river,  
Through the pale door,  
A hideous throng rush out forever,  
And laugh—but smile no more,

is meant as an image of Roderick's soul. But the House of Usher is an image of Poe's own soul, and we can find in it something like an epitome of his ultimate contribution to the literature of the world. It is a story of weakness, and yet in its very abandonment to weakness it has its own strength. It has in it the essence of what Poe's foreign admirers were to find admirable in him and, though it is not the most nearly perfect of his stories, it must for its typical qualities and for the extravagant richness of their presentment be reckoned supreme among them.

## CHAPTER VII

### CRITICISM AND OPINIONS

THERE is no enterprise more temerarious or more anxious for a critic than the description, let alone the valuation, of the work of one of his predecessors in criticism. In regard to particular works, the earlier critic seems at any given time to be as often wrong as right and, in regard to particular works of his own period, more often wrong. The later critic suffers under the grave intellectual disadvantage of being able to be wise after the event. In this imperfect world the nearest approach to an absolute test of literary merit is the test of time. We know, of course, that it is not absolute, but we are betrayed into accepting it as though it were more often than we think. So it comes about that even Coleridge gives for a moment to us modern insects the right to feel superior to him when he says:

Barry Cornwall is a poet, *me saltem judice*: and in that sense of the term in which I apply it to C. Lamb and W. Wordsworth. There are poems of great merit, the authors of which I should not feel impelled so to designate.

We think we know to-day that Barry Cornwall never was, and never showed any signs of being, a poet in the sense in which the word is applied to Lamb, let alone

to Wordsworth. We think we know to-day that Goethe was wrong at one time about the excellence of Ossian. But, while we applaud Dr. Johnson's poor opinion of Ossian, we are ready to patronise him when he expresses a poor opinion of *Lycidas*. We smile over his careful arrangement in order of merit of the sermon-writers of his time whom no one any longer reads. Nevertheless we continue (as Mr. Max Beerbohm has pointed out) the solemn arrangement in order of merit of the novelists of our own time, without any particular certainty that anyone will read them after we are all gone. We know perfectly well that our prevailing standards are no improvement on those which have preceded them and that it will take as great a man as Samuel Johnson to make as few critical errors about contemporary authors. When we look back we have the advantage of a more definite perspective as well as of the fact that time has cleared the field. But the greatest of critics have always judged particular works by standards which have in them an admixture of the ephemeral, and when the work under survey is by a contemporary that admixture often forms a very high proportion of the whole.

It is necessary to make some such prologue as this to the examination of Poe as a critic. He is peculiarly vulnerable to any attack on his specific judgements, and the present writer desires in set terms to warn himself as well as the reader that this vulnerability does not necessarily mean that Poe is not a great critic. But he is, even more than Coleridge, and much more than Goethe, the sort of critic whose rays of light are most often illuminating when they shine upon some other object than that of which he appears to be talking. He is valuable, let us say, upon principles and essentials and

most often valuable when his intuitions and feelings, rather than his intellect, come into play.

I am not sure [he tells us in *Marginalia*] that Tennyson is not the greatest of poets. The uncertainty attending the public conception of the term "poet" alone prevents me from demonstrating that he *is*. Other bards produce effects which are, now and then, otherwise produced than by what we call poems; but Tennyson an effect which only a poem does. His alone are idiosyncratic poems. By the enjoyment or non-enjoyment of the *Morte D'Arthur* or of the *Oenone*, I would test anyone's ideal sense.

It is easy to condemn that as an outstanding example of the provinciality in time, as well as of the tendency to exaggerated statement, with which Poe was so often afflicted. But he goes on to say that:

There are passages in his works which rivet a conviction I had long entertained, that the *indefinite* is an element in the true poesis. Why do some persons fatigue themselves in attempts to unravel such fantasy-pieces as the *Lady of Shalott*? As well unweave the "*ventus textilis*". If the author did not deliberately propose to himself a suggestive indefiniteness of meaning with the view of bringing about a definitiveness of vague and therefore of spiritual *effect*—this at least arose from the silent analytical promptings of that poetic genius which, in its supreme development, embodies all orders of intellectual capacity. I *know* that indefiniteness is an element of the true music—I mean of the true musical expression. Give to it any undue decision—imbue it with any very determinate tone—and you deprive it at once of its ethereal, its ideal, its intrinsic and essential character. You dispel its luxury of dream. You dissolve the atmosphere of the mystic upon which it floats. You exhaust it of its breath of faery. It now becomes a tangible and easily appreciable idea—a thing of the earth, earthly.

Here is a most valuable and revealing description of the way in which he himself looked at poetry, the way in

which he endeavoured to write it himself. We may decline to admit that "the indefinite" is an essential in all poetry but we must see that it is an indispensable element in poetry of the order of Poe's own.

That he was provincial in time it would be futile to deny, and the display of the fault is accentuated by the habit of exaggerated expression to which I have already referred. But all critics must be to some extent provincial in time—the wisest are those who recognise the fact. All poetry, even the greatest, has in it some elements which are merely of the day while others are valid for eternity—or at any rate for the duration of the language in which the poem is written. That critic is not to be blamed who takes into account what appeals to his own generation as well as what may appeal to some incalculable generation of the future.

But that Poe was guilty of the less excusable fault of provinciality in space may be emphatically denied. He never either praised or blamed a book simply because it was published in America or simply because it was published in England. He did not play the sycophant to established English reputations or the snob to the rising literature of his own country. Like all other reviewers before and since, he gave a disproportionate amount of attention, whether for praise or for blame, to the literature which was being produced immediately round him. He was expected to do so; it was part of his job. He was writing for American readers in American magazines. They wanted to be told what sort of books were being produced by their fellow-countrymen. It did not detract from their appreciation of Poe that he was always ready to tell them in the plainest possible terms. He owed something of his reputation, and

therefore something of his livelihood, to the qualities which earned for him the nickname of "the Tomahawk Man". His fame as a killer was a help to the circulation of the magazines to which he contributed. Invective always has its market and a quarrel between authors has for the reader something of the thrill of a gladiatorial combat. (Who has not read with pleasure even in these days Macaulay's destruction of the long dead and forgotten Robert Montgomery?) It was obviously a better spectacle when he buried the tomahawk in the skull of some home-bred author than when in that of a distant European who might never know what had been done to him. Besides, though Poe was fair as between American and English authors, it would be idle to pretend that he was a scrupulously honest reviewer. He had both friends and enemies (both fancied and real) close at hand in America, alliances to maintain and vendettas to prosecute. He did not perhaps do as much for his friends as against his enemies. He believed himself to be by far the greatest writer in the country and that naturally made him stronger in invective than in praise.

He often did well enough, however, for those whom he counted his friends. In writing of a poet named Fitz-Greene Halleck, he utters the following judgement:

*Alnwick Castle* is distinguished, in general, by that air of quiet grace, both in thought and expression, which is the prevailing feature of the muse of Halleck. Its second stanza is a good specimen of this manner. The commencement of the fourth belongs to a very high order of poetry:

Wild roses by the Abbey towers  
Are gay in their young bud and bloom—  
*They were born of a race of funeral flowers*  
That garlanded, in long-gone hours,  
A Templar's knightly tomb.

This is gloriously imaginative, and the effect is singularly increased by the sudden transition from iambs to anapaests. The passage is, I think, the noblest to be found in Halleck, and I would be at a loss to discover its parallel in all American poetry.

(The italics are presumably Poe's.) He quotes also from Margaret Fuller and declares that "here is something in Coleridge's manner, of which the author of *Genevieve* might have had no reason to be ashamed".

These instances come from *The Literati of New York*, which Poe wrote as a magazine series with an eye on republication in book form—hurried journalism from the hurried unhappy latter part of his life. In such circumstances the author is sometimes guilty of what may have seemed to him to have been merely perfunctory praise but which to later readers seems grotesquely fulsome. It is an axiom with some reviewers that, when writing in haste, it is always safer to praise: an ill-considered eulogy is less likely to lead to trouble than an ill-considered attack.

But even here Poe did not forget his enemies. Of Thomas Dunne English, he opens with deceptive sweetness by saying that he has seen "one or two brief poems of considerable merit" over this signature. He quotes one of them, proceeds to find fault with it and works up to:

No spectacle can be more pitiable than that of a man without the commonest school education, busying himself in attempts to instruct mankind on topics of polite literature. The absurdity in such cases does not lie merely in the ignorance displayed by the would-be instructor, but in the transparency of the shifts by which he endeavours to keep this ignorance concealed. The editor of *The Aristidean*, for example, was not laughed at so much on account of writing

“lay” for “lie”, etc., etc., and coupling nouns in the plural with verbs in the singular—as when he writes, above,

So baseless *seems*,  
Azthene, all my early *dreams*—

he was not, I say, laughed at *so much* for his excusable deficiencies of English grammar (although an editor should certainly be able to write *his own name*) as that, in the hope of disguising such deficiency, he was perpetually lamenting the “typographical blunders”, that “in the most unaccountable manner *would* creep into his work”. Nobody was so stupid as to believe for a moment that there existed in New York a single proof-reader—or even a single printer’s devil—who would have permitted *such* errors to escape. By the excuses offered, therefore, the errors were only the more manifestly nailed to the country as Mr. English’s own.

Elsewhere we find his instant vindictiveness even towards a friend, if that friend failed for a single moment to show him the respect he thought his due. Alone among the Bostonians, James Russell Lowell had been disposed to be kind to him. They maintained a correspondence and exchanged complimentary and even affectionate expressions. Lowell invited Poe to contribute to his magazine and lent him money which he could not easily spare. There can be no doubt that he genuinely desired to help a man whom he regarded as gifted and unfortunate. But he committed the indiscretion of publishing *A Fable for Critics* which contains the famous lines:

Here comes Poe with his Raven, like Barnaby Rudge—  
(Three-fifths of him genius, and two-fifths sheer fudge;)  
Who talks like a book of iambs and pentameters,  
In a way to make all men of common sense d—n metres;  
Who has written some things far the best of their kind;  
But somehow the heart seems squeezed out by the mind.

This is reasonably good-humoured in a satire and not



uncomplimentary: surely no man need be offended by being described as three-fifths made up of genius. But Poe showed that the resentment of an injured heart was not to be curbed by the counsels of a prudent mind. He reviewed *A Fable for Critics* in the *Southern Literary Messenger*. The review begins in a strain of moderate depreciation, but Poe's ill temper obviously more and more takes possession of him as he writes and after he has quoted the lines about himself it knows no bounds.

We have given [he says] a fair specimen of the *general* versification. It might have been better—but we are quite sure that it *could not have been worse*. So much for “common sense”, in Mr. Lowell's understanding of the term. Mr. L. should not have meddled with the anapaestic rhythm; it is exceedingly awkward in the hands of one who knows nothing about it, and who *will* persist in fancying that he can write it by ear. . . . No failure was ever more complete or more pitiable. By the publication of a book at once so ambitious and so feeble—so malevolent in design and so harmless in execution—a work so roughly and clumsily, yet so weakly constructed—so very different in body and spirit from anything that he has written before—Mr. Lowell has committed an irrevocable *faux pas* and lowered himself at least fifty per cent. in the literary public opinion.

Oddly enough, in a letter written a few months afterwards, Poe refers to this review and, speaking of the *Fable* itself, says, “It is not much. Lowell might have done better.” Thus did his rages burn themselves out, leaving no trace in himself. He could never be brought to understand that their consequences might last longer in the minds of others. Perhaps the fairest and kindest thing that can be said of this side of him was said by Longfellow, who had received many insults at his hands —“The harshness of his criticisms I have never attributed to anything but the irritation of a sensitive nature,

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shaped by some indefinite sense of wrong". Others, however, were not always so generous.

In all these specimens we have seen Poe in his capacity as a reviewer, and it was mainly in reviewing that his critical ideas had to be expressed. But it is not an ideal medium for the purpose. Mr. Aldous Huxley has, I think, best defined the difference between critic and reviewer by saying that the first assumes some knowledge in the reader of the work under consideration while the second must assume none. This distinction must not be taken too literally, for the two activities shade off into one another, but it suggests one of the disabilities under which the reviewer labours when he aspires to be a critic also. But Poe was a critic, though to find him at his best one has to undertake a labour like that of extracting gold from a low-grade ore.

What he would have liked to do in this way can be best seen in the *Marginalia*. These oddly assorted notes would in themselves offer to the discerning eye a sufficient picture both of their author and of his circumstances. He made many of them because ideas came to him which he had no opportunity of developing for their own sake. He published them because an agreement for so many pages a month in a magazine at so many dollars a page was an important consideration to him. And, since they could be worth so much a page, he was not as anxious to winnow them as a man should be when he allows his note-books to be printed: probably, on the contrary, he swelled them. They contain such rubbish as this:

Talking of puns [but he was not]: "Why do they not give us quail for dinner, as usual?" demanded Count Fessis, the other day, of H——, the classicist and sportsman. "Be-

cause at this season," replied H——, who was dozing,—  
*"qualis sopor fessis."* (Quail is so poor, Fessis.)

This has its incidental value in throwing a miserable little light on the picture which Poe always wanted his readers to have of him as the associate of luxurious men of culture. But it remains miserable in any aspect. The form of the note-book also gave him opportunities which might otherwise not have occurred of pillorying the plagiarist, a sinner who with him became, as Mr. Hervey Allen justly says, almost the subject of a monomania.<sup>1</sup> Yet another element in *Marginalia* is that of

<sup>1</sup> He does, however, exhibit some remarkable examples of the plagiarist's art. He may have been foolishly looking for a quarrel when he accused Longfellow of copying *The Haunted Palace* in *The Beleaguered City*. But in *Marginalia* he unearths more than one interesting example. This will serve as a specimen:

"In a *Hymn for Christmas*, by Mrs. Hemans, we find the following stanza:

Oh, lovely voices of the sky  
 Which hymned the Saviour's birth,  
 Are ye not singing still on high,  
 Ye that sang 'Peace on Earth?'  
 To us yet speak the strains  
 Wherewith, in times gone by,  
 Ye blessed the Syrian swains,  
 Oh, voices of the sky!

"And at page 305 of *The Christian Keepsake and Missionary Annual for 1840*—a Philadelphia Annual—we find *A Christmas Carol* by Richard W. Dodson:—the first stanza running thus:

Angel voices of the sky!  
 Ye that hymned Messiah's birth,  
 Sweetly singing from on high  
 'Peace, Goodwill to all on earth!'  
 Oh, to us impart those strains!  
 Bid our doubts and fears to cease!  
 Ye that cheered the Syrian swains,  
 Cheer us with that song of peace!"

Such things must be expected to occur in a young society imperfectly supplied with books and we must be grateful to Poe for preserving a few specimens, if only for the room which it gives us to speculate on the mind and motives of Richard W. Dodson.

comments which are meaningless to-day without more research than could ever justify the trouble.

Brown, in his *Amusements*, speaks of having transfused the blood of an ass into the veins of an astrological quack—and there can be no doubt that one of Hague's progenitors was the man.

When all this worthless stuff has been sifted away there is a residue of considerable value. There is, for example, a brief, authoritative sermon on "poetic licence" which goes straight to the centre of the question and which, though it may have been more needed then during the aftermath of the Romantic Movement, is not without its value to-day:

There lies a deep and sealed well  
Within yon leafy forest hid,  
Whose pent and lonely waters swell  
*Its confines chill and drear amid.*

This putting the adjective after the noun is merely an inexcusable Gallicism; but the putting the preposition after the noun is alien to all language, and in opposition to all its principles. Such things, in general, serve only to betray the versifier's poverty of resource; and when an inversion of this kind occurs, we say to ourselves, "Here the poet lacked the skill to make out his line without distorting the natural or colloquial order of the words". Now and then, however, we must refer the error not to deficiency of skill, but to something far less defensible—to an idea that such things belong to the essence of poetry—that it needs them to distinguish it from prose—that we are poetical, in a word, very much in the ratio of our unprosaicalness at these points. Even when employing the phrase "poetic licence"—a phrase which has to answer for an infinity of sins—people who think in this way seem to have an indistinct conviction that the licence in question *involves a necessity of being adopted*. The true artist will avail himself of no "licence" whatever.

The very word will disgust him; for it says—"Since you seem unable to manage without these peccadillo advantages, you must have them, I suppose; and the world, half shutting its eyes, will do its best not to see the awkwardness which they stamp upon your poem".

Few things have greater tendency than inversion to render verse feeble and ineffective. In most cases where a line is spoken of as "forcible", the force may be referred to directness of expression. A vast majority of the passages which have become household through frequent quotation owe their popularity either to this directness, or, in general, to the scorn of "poetic licence". In short, as regards verbal construction, *the more prosaic* a poetical style is the better.

The element of plain good sense here displayed presents itself more often in Poe than might perhaps be expected. It is to be seen in his remarks on criticism itself in the lecture on *The Poetic Principle*. He tells the story of the critic who submitted to Apollo "a very caustic criticism upon a very admirable book". Apollo asked the critic whether the work contained no beauties and received the reply that he did not know, that he had concerned himself only with the errors. "On hearing this, Apollo, handing him a sack of unwinnowed wheat, bade him pick out *all the chaff* for his reward." Since Poe was what he was, a creative artist convinced of his own merits and yet always a target for ill- or well-intentioned commentators who concentrated on his defects, it would have been natural for him to have accepted all the implications of this fable without reservation. But he does not. He is, on the contrary, at pains to point out that they are misleading:

Now this fable answers very well as a hit at the critics—but I am by no means sure that the god was in the right. I am by no means certain that the true limits of the critical

duty are not grossly misunderstood. Excellence, in a poem especially, may be considered in the light of an axiom, which need only be properly *put*, to become self-evident. It is *not* excellence if it require to be demonstrated as such:—and thus to point out too particularly the merits of a work of Art, is to admit that they are *not* merits altogether.

Inside the dreamer, the poet born before his time, and inside the “ring-tailed roarer” and the “Tomahawk Man” as well, there was a hard core of sound judgement which did not often fail when there was material worthy of it. He could be just even to the hated Longfellow when a good poem was in question. “With no great range of the imagination”, he says of the “Proem” to *The Waif*, “these lines have been justly admired for their delicacy of expression. . . . The poem on the whole is chiefly to be admired for the graceful *insouciance* of its metre, so well in accordance with the character of the sentiments, and especially for the *ease* of the general manner.” That is an indisputably exact description of the piece.

It is true that he exaggerated the importance of Tennyson among the poets of the world, but it was only in the height of his tone that he erred. He describes the essential characteristics of Tennyson with substantial accuracy. He refuses to be deceived by Bulwer Lytton (to whom he might have fallen an easy victim) but he recognises, this side of idolatry, the dimensions of the genius of Dickens:

The idiosyncrasy of his intellect would lead him naturally into the most fluent and simple style of narration. In tales of ordinary sequence he may and will long reign triumphant. He has a talent for all things, but no positive genius for adaptation, and still less for that metaphysical art in which the souls of all mysteries be.

And he continually throws out such shrewd suggestions as this:

The continuous and premeditated puns of Hood, however, are to be regarded as the weak points of the man. Independently of their ill effect, in a literary view, as mere puns, they leave upon us a painful impression; for too evidently they are the hypochondriac's struggles at mirth—they are the grinnings of the death's-head.

Possibly the most remarkable example of his application of severe common sense to things about which he felt very passionately is to be found in his essay on *The Rationale of Verse*. I do not propose to devote much space to this essay since it has not for us to-day the importance which it had for its author. Since Poe wrote it we have had innumerable treatises on the mechanics of verse written by persons better qualified to advance their opinions than the "pedagogues" whom he assailed. But he lived in a time when it was stated and repeated, as in a book of grammar which he quotes, that "versification is the art of arranging words into lines of correspondent length, so as to produce harmony by the regular alternation of syllables differing in quantity". He was a man to whom technique meant much, since he had to make his rhythms say what words would not. When he meditated on technique, it was obvious to him that the prosodies of the pedants were rubbish and he set to work to clear them away and to substitute his own.

There is in this essay a touch of the uneasy arrogance which distinguishes the earlier essay on cryptography—"Employing from among the numerous 'ancient' feet the spondee, the trochee, the iambus, the anapaest, the dactyl, and the caesura alone, I will engage to scan

*correctly* any of the Horatian rhythms, or any true rhythm that human ingenuity can conceive". But apart from this the tone throughout is that of a good workman talking about his tools. As much as anything he wrote it makes the reader wish that his weaknesses had been fewer, his circumstances easier and his life longer, for it is evident that with leisure and without distraction he might have been, what he never was, a supreme artificer of verse.

It was in this light that he would have liked to see himself and to be seen by others, as is plain from his account of the composition of *The Raven*, to which reference has been made in an earlier chapter. True, no poem of such merit was ever confected by the process of cool calculation which he describes, and the evidence goes to show that this poem was far from being conceived as a whole, and then executed according to plan, but rather grew and changed over a period of years. But intensive artistic effort of this kind would have been of immense benefit to his poetry. Unfortunately the poet rarely had time to listen to the counsels of the practical critic who lived side by side with him in the same body.

When we come to Poe's views on poetry in itself, as opposed to its embodiment in words, the evidence is scanty and scattered but not hard to interpret in its general drift. He knew very well what he meant by the word, and what he meant as a boy at West Point he still meant when he delivered his lecture on *The Poetic Principle* during the last years of his life. In 1831 he wrote the "Letter to Mr. B——" which serves as a preface to the volume of that year. This is at once a confession of faith and a war-cry. He attacks "the heresy of what



is called, very foolishly, the Lake School". Wordsworth "seems to think that the end of poetry is, or should be, instruction". The young Poe does not.

A poem, in my opinion, is opposed to a work of science by having, for its *immediate* object, pleasure, not truth; to romance, by having, for its object, an *indefinite* instead of a *definite* pleasure, being a poem only so far as this object is attained; romance presenting perceptible images with definite, poetry with *indefinite* sensations, to which end music is an *essential*, since the comprehension of sweet sound is our most indefinite conception. Music, when combined with a pleasurable idea, is poetry; music, without the idea, is simply music; the idea, without the music, is prose, from its very definitiveness.

In the same place he says that Coleridge "goes wrong by reason of his own profundity", but this, of course, is pure Coleridge, some of it word for word. But he did not echo the older critic merely as a young man temporarily under his spell. This was indeed something more than an echo. It was like what happens when a note from a violin causes to resonate a glass which is attuned to it. What Coleridge enounced Poe knew to be his own truth, a principle of life from which he would not and could not ever depart.

It might with some plausibility be argued that it would have been to his advantage to depart from it. The America of those days was not much inclined to be receptive to the doctrine that the value of a poem has nothing to do with its moral content. Mr. Poe, who was widely believed to be a dissolute fellow, might have done something to rehabilitate himself in the eyes of the public had he been ready to modify this doctrine. But he continued obstinately to preach it, at the end of his life as at the beginning.

Dividing the world of mind [he says] into its three most immediately obvious distinctions, we have the Pure Intellect, Taste, and the Moral Sense. I place Taste in the middle, because it is just this position which in the mind it occupies. It holds intimate relations with either extreme; but from the Moral Sense is separated by so faint a difference that Aristotle has not hesitated to place some of its operations among the virtues themselves. Nevertheless we find the *offices* of the trio marked with a sufficient distinction. Just as the Intellect concerns itself with Truth, so Taste informs us of the Beautiful, while the Moral Sense is regardful of Duty. Of this latter, while Conscience teaches the obligation, and Reason the expediency, Taste contents herself with displaying the charms, waging war upon Vice solely on the ground of her deformity, her disproportion, her animosity to the fitting, to the appropriate, to the harmonious, in a word, to Beauty.

And again, in even sharper terms:

I would define, in brief, the Poetry of words as *The Rhythmical Creation of Beauty*. Its sole arbiter is Taste. With the Intellect or with the Conscience it has only collateral relations. Unless incidentally, it has no concern whatever either with Duty or with Truth.

It cannot be pretended that here Poe produced a satisfactory philosophy of poetry, nor can one construct such a philosophy by any piecing together of scattered references throughout his works. He had neither the training nor the leisure for such an achievement, perhaps not the habit of mind: if he had devoted himself to setting up a system it would very likely have been one of fantastic logicity and equal unreality. I should be inclined to say that where he speaks of the essential being of poetry, of its nature and of its place in the life of man, he speaks rather as a prophet than as a philosopher. He declares truths which have been revealed to him by

his intuition—"We are often made to feel, with a shivering delight, that from an earthly harp are stricken notes which *cannot* have been unfamiliar to the angels". Though he does not say so in so many words, yet there is for him something other-worldly in poetry or in that beauty which poetry exists to make real to us:

Yes, Heaven is thine; but this  
Is a world of sweets and sour;  
Our flowers—are merely flowers,  
And the shadow of thy perfect bliss  
Is the sunshine of ours.

It is this profound inner feeling that the beauty we see or make on earth is only the shadow of perfect beauty elsewhere which makes him assert that the tone of its highest manifestation is sadness:

Beauty of whatever kind, in its supreme development, invariably excites the sensitive soul to tears. Melancholy is thus the most legitimate of all the poetical tones.

It was poetry of this order which gave Poe the highest excitement, it was poetry of this order which he tried to produce. Mr. Krutch justly remarks that "he could prove that his own work was pure and perfect and the hidden spring of energy behind his critical writing was the desire to do just that". Nor, from a poet who turns to criticism, can anything else be reasonably expected. In the moral or in the practical sphere a man may admit his own deficiencies and endeavour to correct them by the example of others. But it is not the same in the sphere of taste. When a man of sincere mind feels that a certain form of beauty is that which has the strongest effect upon him, he must, if he sets out to prove anything at all, try to prove that it is the highest form. He

cannot succeed. How could he? But he can in varying degrees enjoy a pragmatismal success. He can convince himself and he can convince others. And in the ratio of his pragmatismal success is the strength of his influence on the intellectual life of his own and later times.

Poe's influence on the intellectual life of the later nineteenth century is admittedly enormous: we shall see later in more precise detail what was its extent and how far it still persists. That influence was, as I have said, more that of the prophet than of the philosopher. It was Poe's fervour for his own doctrine that made him a power. He preached a religion rather than a system of aesthetics and it was as a religion spreads that his gospel conquered an important part of the world. It is noteworthy that he even went so far as to sketch out what is extraordinarily like a plan for the organisation of a church. We have seen him already saying to Mrs. Whitman:

Would it not be "glorious", darling, to establish, in America, the sole unquestionable aristocracy—that of intellect—to secure its supremacy—to lead and to control it? All this I can do, Helen, and will—if you bid me—and aid me.

The attitude of mind which lies behind this wild dream can be found in the *Letter to Mr. B*——, written nearly twenty years before:

Another than yourself might here observe, "Shakespeare is in possession of the world's good opinion, and yet Shakespeare is the greatest of poets. It appears then that as the world judges correctly, why should you be ashamed of their favourable judgment?" The difficulty lies in the interpretation of the word "judgment" or "opinion". The opinion is the world's, truly, but it may be called theirs as a man would call a book his, having bought it; he did not write the book,

but it is his; they did not originate the opinion, but it is theirs. A fool, for example, thinks Shakespeare a great poet—yet the fool has never read Shakespeare. But the fool's neighbour, who is a step higher on the Andes of the mind, whose head (that is to say, his more exalted thought) is too far above the fool to be seen or understood, but whose feet (by which I mean his every-day actions) are sufficiently near to be discerned, and by means of which that superiority is ascertained, which *but* for them would never have been discovered—this neighbour asserts that Shakespeare is a great poet—the fool believes him, and it is henceforward his *opinion*. This neighbour's own opinion has, in like manner, been adopted from one above *him*, and so, ascendingly, to a few gifted individuals who kneel around the summit, beholding, face to face, the master spirit who stands upon the pinnacle.

In the first democratic country of the modern world and in a world which largely assumed that democracy would eventually be the natural state of mankind, Poe deliberately rejected the opinion of the mob and claimed the privilege of "a few gifted individuals" to have their judgement accepted. Here again he never wavered. He and those like him had been endowed with the ability, and therefore with the right, to decide what was beautiful and what was not. He did believe that they should, by virtue of their innate superiority, be able to assert their position. His long struggle never, for more than a moment at a time, convinced him to the contrary. But it did help to convince others, who from a distance witnessed his failure, that, while the poet is a superior being, yet it cannot be hoped that the world will recognise him as such. From his opinions they took the view that the poet is marked out from other men: from his career and his fate they took the view that those "few gifted individuals" can recognise one another but

must not expect to be recognised by anyone else. Had they not themselves recognised Poe across the width of the Atlantic? Were they not themselves despised and rejected? In nothing more than in this was Poe a factor of that great attempt at a cultural secession from the interests of common humanity which is called the Decadence.

## CHAPTER VIII

### POE AND THE WORLD

EDGAR ALLAN POE has been treated here not only as a man who wrote poems, stories and criticism but also as a man who was a vital link in a process of intellectual development, as one who was certainly the symbol, and perhaps the inspiring prophet, of a great spiritual movement in the half-century that followed his death. The time has come to draw the threads of argument together and to say finally where he stands in both these capacities.

The truth is that it is not easy to dissociate them. There are few who would dispute that he is one of the great figures of American literature, hardly rivalled in his own century save by Walt Whitman and indubitably America's first considerable contribution to the poetic life of mankind. But it is another matter to say how far he holds that position as the author of certain works and how far as symbol or inspirer. His symbolic value, created by the tragic quality of his life and adversities, has played a large part in the growth of his reputation. The facts which made his American contemporaries either pity or despise him more than they admired him have made lovers of poetry in other countries and in later times regard him as the very type of the unfortunate

poet whose genius is not of this world and can never be at ease in it. In just the same way both Byron and Wilde have been regarded as symbols and have thus acquired outside the circle of their own countrymen a reputation to which their own countrymen do not always think them entitled.

That Poe survives as an author in his own right, apart from any question of the influence he may have exercised, is not to be questioned. To have written poems so irresistibly attractive to the reciter as *The Raven* and *The Bells* may have been a doubtful service to humanity but it is an achievement all the same. Then there are the other better poems, even if only a handful of them, which will always be read for their own sake and not merely because they have been the inspiration of later poetry.

It is the same with his work in prose. *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, *The Mystery of Marie Roget* and *The Purloined Letter* have a particular interest since in them we can discern the origins of the modern detective story. *The Gold Bug* has had a numerous progeny of stories of treasure-hunting. *The Pit and the Pendulum* and *The Fall of the House of Usher* have in their different ways been responsible for many imaginings of fear and horror. But these tales are all read every year by innumerable people who do not know that they are literary points of departure and would not care if they did.

Paradoxically enough, Poe, the intellectual aristocrat, the despiser of the mob, the man who failed in the world because he was too fine and ethereal for it, has achieved a genuine and solid popular reputation. He is enjoyed, nearly a hundred years after his death, by those who have no interest in either his theories of litera-



ture or his place in literary history, by those to whom he is simply a writer who can tell a good story. It is no accident that the collection of his tales stands, alongside *Pickwick Papers* and the like, among the earlier titles of so many series of cheap reprints of the classics. He was indeed in the strictest sense a popular author in his own day and only the adverse conditions under which he had to work and live prevented him from reaping the rewards of popularity. Professor Killis Campbell, with an unrivalled knowledge of the evidence, considers that he was never ranked as the first poet in America and that he was more admired as a critic than as a writer of fiction. That may be so, though I fancy Professor Campbell relies too much on what was said of him by other men of letters—not always the safest guide to an author's popularity. In any case, popularity is a comparative thing, and if he did not stand first in the opinion of the fiction-reading public of his time, he stood high in it. It was through the sheer bad luck of being born too soon that he did not receive enormous sums from magazines for his stories and from Hollywood for his film-rights.

I have emphasised this point because it is too easy to fall into the error of thinking of him only as one of those writers whose work escapes in their own day the public recognition which is afterwards given to it. He was in this respect no Keats or Shelley even, let alone a Chatterton. In another respect, however, he was one of those prophets whose teaching is not heard until after their death.

The spreading of his doctrine began with an event resembling that which occurred when his own spirit vibrated in sympathy with the words of Coleridge.

Baudelaire discovered some of his works which had appeared in translation in French magazines. The effect on Baudelaire was extraordinary, almost like that of a sudden religious conversion. "When first", he says, "I opened one of his books I saw with fear and delight not only themes of which I had dreamt but phrases which I had shaped in my mind and which he had written twenty years before."

Poe would perhaps have been pleased by the image which the young French poet then formed of him—"rich, happy—a young gentleman of genius straying sometimes into literature in the midst of the thousand occupations of a life of elegance". But Baudelaire was even more deeply impressed when his passionate search for anything he could learn about Poe brought him nearer the truth. The "ironic antithesis" between the Poe of his imagination and the Poe of reality filled him with an "irrepressible tenderness" and he determined to make the true Poe known in France. It was not an easy task which he had undertaken. He had first to know Poe's work himself, to substantiate by a thorough acquaintance what that first dazzling flash of intuition had shown him. And Poe's work was hard to come by.

It is not much less difficult a task to discover just where and how Baudelaire began. For Poe's earliest incursion into French literature has given almost as much trouble to investigators as his mythical second journey to Europe. It is true that in this matter he was not so deliberate or circumstantial a liar as in the other, yet he indulged in misstatements which have helped to confound confusion. Some of his stories were printed in Parisian magazines, with or without mention of his name, during his lifetime. So much is certain at any

rate and he himself was aware of it. But he said, speaking of a tale by Eugène Sue, that at first he had feared that he might be suspected of plagiarising from it in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* until he remembered that his own tale had been published in *Graham's Magazine* in April 1841 and that

some years ago the *Paris Charivari* copied my story with complimentary comments; objecting, however, to the *Rue Morgue* on the ground that no such street (to the *Charivari's* knowledge) existed in Paris. I do not wish of course to look upon M. Sue's adaptation of my property in any other light than that of a compliment. The similarity *may* have been entirely accidental.

Again he said, in another place, "We have written paper after paper which attracted no notice at all until it appeared as original in *Berkley's Miscellany* or the *Paris Charivari*".

The clue to this little puzzle is to be found in a letter to E. A. Duyckinck, who had told Mrs. Clemm something about a mention of *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* in "some of the Parisian newspapers":

She could not give me the details—merely saying that you had told her the *Murders in the Rue Morgue* was spoken of in the *Paris Charivari* soon after the issue of that tale in *Graham's Mag.* April 1841.

This cannot have been the sole basis for Poe's statements: the dates render that impossible. But it illustrates the way in which Poe's mind worked. It is easy to make a guess at what happened. Duyckinck makes a casual remark to Mrs. Clemm, who repeats it, no doubt very vaguely, to Poe. "Was it the *Charivari*?" Poe asks eagerly. "Why, yes, dear," says Mrs. Clemm, anxious

to please her Eddie and aware that this is the way to do so. "I believe that was it." The *Paris Charivari*, in fact, neither reproduced the story nor even mentioned it. But Poe was anxious to show that he was honoured in the Old World, if not as much as he thought he should have been in the New; the name of *Charivari* was sufficiently distinguished to make him snatch at the belief that he had been thus honoured and—there was no one in America very likely to check his statement by searching its pages. Judged by the standards one comes to adopt in dealing with Poe's statements about himself, this one does not contain an unduly high proportion of inaccuracy. It has, however, become the basis of a legend which only great diligence in research has been able to disprove.<sup>1</sup>

He might have contented himself with the truth. He received the honour of a very appreciative article on his work by E. D. Forgue in the *Revue des deux mondes*. *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* was reproduced not by one but by two Parisian newspapers independently. This occurrence gave rise to a law-suit, an amusing episode which is neither here nor there in the present context. I am afraid that the myth of a volume entitled *Les Contes d'Edgar Poe*, translated by Mme. Isabelle Meunier in duodecimo in Paris in 1846, is also neither here nor there. But it deserves to be mentioned if only because it illustrates the cloud of deception and mystification which arises round anything in which Poe is concerned—though it must be said that he himself this time had no hand in its origination or propagation.

<sup>1</sup> See *The Influence of Edgar Allan Poe in France*, by Celestin Pierre Cambiaire, New York, 1927. To this admirably exhaustive work of scholarship I am indebted for several of the facts used in this chapter.

Author after author refers to this volume, but they are presumably all repeating one another, since there is no evidence that even one of them has ever seen it. The industrious M. Cambiaire has been unable to find the slightest trace of its real existence. A copy may, of course, be discovered one day: stranger things have happened. Until then it must remain one of the "great imaginaries" of bibliography.

Mme. Meunier did translate some of Poe's work for magazines. Among the pieces she thus published was *Eiros and Charmion* and, if I were obliged to make a guess, I should say it was this which Baudelaire saw first. It is at any rate easier to imagine this strange wild fragment having on him the electric effect which he describes than *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* or the *Descent into the Maelstrom* or *The Gold Bug*. However that may be, he set to work to make translations of his own and laboured at them with the obstinate striving after perfection which he gave to his original work. In the end he had translated all of the stories, including *Arthur Gordon Pym*, and a few of the poems, though these he regarded as untranslatable.

Seldom has a disciple devoted himself more earnestly to spreading the knowledge of his master's wisdom. Baudelaire was a man who suffered at intervals from an indolence or a lethargy which amounted to a disease. It is sometimes hard to imagine how he drove himself to the energy which he unquestionably put into the composition and the correction of his own poetry. It is harder to understand how he found energy enough left over for the work of another. Only something in the nature of a religious enthusiasm can explain it.

It is from this self-dedication of Baudelaire that we

must date the beginning of the movement which is called sometimes the Decadence and sometimes Symbolism. True enough, its elements had been in existence for a long time already. They are discernible in the Romantic Movement and, as I have suggested, if we look far enough back we shall find perhaps that its ultimate parent, at any rate on one side, is Coleridge. But now it had become conscious of its own existence. It had found a prophet and the prophet had found an apostle.

Neither of the names by which this movement is usually described is entirely satisfactory but the first is possibly the fitter to be adopted. It has at least an element of defiance in despair which is characteristic of its spirit. In the second there is no more than the expression of a literary preference, corresponding very closely to Poe's insistence on the "indefinite" in poetry. But, whatever the difficulty of description, the movement did recognisably exist and is traceable everywhere in the second half of the nineteenth century, spreading outwards from France where Baudelaire raised his prodigious crop from the seed of Poe.

It was in essence a reaction against the world as the Decadents saw it, almost, but not quite, an attempt at a counter-revolution. For they belonged to a generation which looked out upon a world completely changed since the time of their grandfathers. There had been the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution, two events the fruits of which were now manifest and examinable. The Decadents rejected those fruits. They did not like the bourgeois democracies which had superseded the rule of kings and aristocracies. They did not like industrialism which was destroying beauty

and swamping the individual intellect in a flood of mere wealth. They did not like science, the malignant servitor of democracy and industrialism, and they echoed Poe's sonnet:

Science! true daughter of old Time thou art!  
Who alterest all things with thy peering eyes.  
Why preyest thou thus upon the poet's heart,  
Vulture, whose wings are dull realities?  
How should he love thee? or how deem thee wise,  
Who wouldst not leave him in his wandering  
To seek for treasure in the jewelled skies,  
Albeit he soared with an undaunted wing?

At a later age, Poe declared that he had "as deep a reverence for the True as ever inspired the bosom of man". But, he proceeded, "the demands of Truth are severe. She has no sympathy with the myrtles. All *that* which is so indispensable in Song is precisely all *that* with which *she* has nothing whatever to do." There is no need here to analyse these utterances or to assess their validity. They were a rallying cry for the Decadents and had for them an added force in the life of the man from whose lips they came. Poe had preferred poetry to the severe utilitarian truth of the common world, he had preferred poetry to the truth which produces steam-engines and democratic politicians, and because of this the world had broken him. He had been a martyr as well as a prophet. For his beliefs he had died in misery and his tragedy recommended his doctrine.

Nor, as they saw it, had he died feebly. He had a proud, even an arrogant spirit. He was like some legitimate prince, who, even with his back to the wall and the mob's firing-party in front of him, still proclaims his divine right. So had Poe to the end proclaimed the

divine right of the poet to follow his own ideals and the divine superiority of the poet over the mob. Poe's life, as we have had occasion to see, was not quite like that. And yet that *was* the real Poe, the man who dreamt of establishing in America, and of himself controlling, an aristocracy of intellect. Baudelaire was not deceived nor were those whom he influenced. It was Poe's essence, freed from accidental impurities, that became the type of the *poète maudit* of whom Baudelaire wrote:

Lorsque, par un décret des puissances suprêmes,  
Le Poète apparaît en ce monde ennuyé,  
Sa mère épouvantée et pleine de blasphèmes  
Crispe ses poings vers Dieu, qui la prend en pitié:

—“Ah! que n'ai-je mis bas tout un noeud de vipères  
Plutôt que de nourrir cette dérision!  
Maudite soit la nuit aux plaisirs éphémères  
Où mon ventre a conçu mon expiation.”

The Decadent point of view is perhaps even better defined in the poem *L'Albatros*, which Baudelaire placed after this in the *Fleurs du mal*. It describes how the sailors sometimes catch the albatrosses which follow their ship in the air but which when they are once on deck can only hobble painfully, letting their great white wings trail by their sides. It continues:

Ce voyageur ailé, comme il est gauche et veule!  
Lui, naguère si beau, qu'il est comique et laid!  
L'un agace son bec avec un brûle-gueule,  
L'autre mine, en boitant, l'infirme qui volait!

Le Poète est semblable au prince des nuées  
Qui hante la tempête et se rit de l'archer;  
Exilé sur le sol au milieu des huées,  
Ses ailes de géant l'empêchent de marcher.

This conception was something entirely different from



the "Bohemianism" of the Romantics. That was understood to be merely a phase of youth, of first beginnings. The characters in Murger's *La Vie de Bohème* end by being successful and recognised. There was something of the old-fashioned "Bohemian" in Verlaine but it was the Decadent conception which he developed in his *Les Poètes maudits*. It was exemplified by him in his own life, in his poverty and shiftlessness, in his wretched attachment to Rimbaud, in his spell in prison. It was exemplified by Rimbaud no less. He was involved in Verlaine's escapades and it was he who denounced his companion to the police. He penetrated far into the unexplored territories of poetry when he was still a boy (he is in actual achievement a greater poet than Poe ever was) and tired of it all when he was barely out of his 'teens. He went off to wander the world, to become a gun-runner and general bad character somewhere between the Abyssinian border and Suakim, and to return prematurely exhausted at the age of forty to France, where he learnt of the publication of his "posthumous" poems and soon put the matter right by dying of a gangrened wound. Painters too found themselves driven by the same daemon—as witness the stories of Gauguin and Van Gogh.

Verlaine and Rimbaud may well serve as types of the *poètes maudits*, for Rimbaud, though he declined to be cursed in that particular way, escaped the curse only by a voluntary flight from poetry to another sort of damnation. His was in a sense a revolt against a revolt. Whether instinctively or consciously, he divined the weakness in the position of the Decadents. It is that they never quite made up their minds whether the poet's fate was always to be this, whether it was a tragic

necessity of his being, or whether there was hope of a better world, possibly attainable by their own efforts, in which he would be accorded the honour that is his due. On the whole they inclined to think that he must always be marked out from the rest of mankind by sufferings material as well as spiritual. To have expected, let alone to have worked for, any improvement in his lot would have been too much like falling into step with the world-wide idea of progress, that progress which makes so many promises and takes away so much more than it gives.

It is for this reason that I have called the Decadence a secession, rather than an attempt at a counter-revolution. The real counter-revolution began in England and, though in its origins it was often confused with the Decadence, was a quite different sequel to the Romantic Movement. It began with William Morris (who assuredly was not uninfluenced by Poe in his earlier days) and can be seen at work now in the tendencies represented by such bodies as the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings and the National Trust. Morris believed that a democracy freed from unnatural conditions would in the end give him the world he wanted. He and his successors have always striven for as much popular support as they could get.

The leaders of the Decadence hardly even wanted converts: they were merely willing to accept kindred spirits who had been aroused by their proclamations of faith in themselves. They were so much disgusted by the world about them that they could not help aiming at strangeness, at difference—and it seemed to them that to make wholesale conversions would have been to establish wholesale sameness. At most they were to be

aristocrats, who lived on the lower orders, not for or with them.

Poe had a different ideal, which was twisted in its presentation by the circumstances of his life. It was quite simple and not really absurd. He perceived that the leaders of the society in which he lived were rich men who, by their talents for buying and selling, had attained a position entitling them to the respect of all those whose talents were less. He could see no reason why an equal or greater respect should not be given to a man whose talents enabled him to write a good poem. This was what he really desired, and in his more exalted moments he thought that one day his desire would be gratified and even that he might live to see the day. His method even was almost practical. It disregarded only his own weaknesses of character and the extent to which they were notorious—and what man can be expected not to do that? He proposed to establish a magazine of his own, and the success of *Graham's Magazine* under his editorship promised that it would make him wealthy. As controller of this organ he would mould the opinion of his faithful readers and teach them to acknowledge the pre-eminence of poetry and his own pre-eminence as a poet. He would then be not only a rich and respected citizen, who owed no man anything and could always meet his bills, but he would also enjoy the special respect due to a man who brings to this world melodious messages from another.

His French disciples did not see this set in his mind. They looked objectively at what they knew of his career and they adopted him as the type of the poet who is driven into secession. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the myth which they instantly and

instinctively made out of him imposed itself on them. From their point of view his life was his greatest, his most persuasive, his most inspiring work of art. Seen from across the ocean, it "composed", it fell into a significant shape. It blended with the pictures of his heroes. Huysmans, in describing the character of Des Essaintes, is at no pains to conceal the fact that his inspiration comes from Poe. This lonely and fantastically refined voluptuary is but a little further along the road of Decadence than Roderick Usher and the master of Arnheim. He withdraws from the world to occupy himself solely with his own sensations. So, reason the Decadents, should the poet—if he can. If he cannot, the result is tragedy—and perhaps that is the better end, since it provides so fine, so nerve-thrilling a spectacle for those of like sensibilities.

Poe's influence on what may be called the purely literary, as distinct from the moral, side of the movement, that side of it which is summed up by the word "Symbolism", is no less easily traceable. It is indeed an error to attempt to make too sharp a distinction between the two sides. When the Decadents rejected Science and pointed her out as their enemy, they rejected too the exactitude of expression after which she must always necessarily strive. They were in hasty and indignant retreat from the world of blue-prints and mathematical formulae. Symbolism as a poetic faith means only that more powerful emotional results are secured by suggestion than by statement. Verlaine's *Art Poétique* is a gay, graceful and wilful gloss on Poe's rather obscurely expressed doctrine of the "indefinite". Verlaine had the seed of Poe from Baudelaire, and they were both great poets. What they planted flourished

and the growth spread outwards over the face of Europe. It caught, in France, Stéphane Mallarmé and inspired him not merely to the "rêve caressant" of a perfect translation of Poe's poems (which, as nearly as possible, he achieved <sup>1</sup>) but also to be as indefinite as possible in his own work. After him there came many poets, not all of whom need to be mentioned now. We may mention Albert Samain, whose peculiar misfortune, entitling him to be called a *poète maudit*, was tuberculosis; Stuart Merrill and Francis Vielé-Griffin (both of them, as it happens, Americans who chose to write in French) and Henri de Régnier. Poe's care for technique became an inflammation. Rimbaud had already given the vowels their colours, which Poe would have loved to do if he had only thought of it. Another French poet elevated this discovery into an elaborate system in strict accordance with which he wrote vast works which are unfortunately not readable. (And it is worth recalling that Ernest Dowson used to quote "the viol, the violet and the vine" in proof of his contention that "v" is the most beautiful consonant in the English language.) With these the *poète maudit* was already disappearing. Symbolist survived Decadent. M. de Régnier became, what Baudelaire had grotesquely and indeed paranoiacally desired to be, a member of the French Academy. His later style is almost Parnassian, pleasing and full of agreeably subdued colours. The secession was not permanent. Its later members returned to the fold. Its earlier members, then dead or old, had monuments erected to them within the walls.

<sup>1</sup> M. Cambiaire (*op. cit.*) makes the interesting suggestion that these translations, written in highly rhythmical prose, helped to influence the new generation in the direction of *vers libre*.

But the movement swept wider than France. In Belgium it embraced M. Maeterlinck, all of whose early works were written in the shadow of the House of Usher. In the German-speaking countries even the almost excessively virile talent of Richard Dehmel paid tribute to it, and in Hugo von Hofmannsthal, and still more in Stefan Georg, it asserted still further the claims of mystery. It can be felt in Rainer Maria Rilke and in the Swedish poet Gustav Fröding. It can be felt all over Europe in a hundred poets who desired to be different from the civilisation in which they had been nurtured.

In England the furthest-flung foam of the wave became the poetry of the 'nineties—the unhappy Dowson and the wretched Lionel Johnson who qualified as a *poète maudit* by falling backwards off a high stool in a saloon-bar and cracking an abnormally thin skull. Mr. Arthur Symonds confused the accidents of life as it is lived in Paris with the realities of the movement. John Davidson sturdily rejected all its spiritual implications and fastened upon Poe's unique technical invention. Mr. Yeats, the one really great poet of the 'nineties, has a little confused the issue by his intimacy with the mythology of the Celts but, so far as indefiniteness goes, he is to-day the sole heir of Poe's vast estate.

We have wandered rather far from the side of Decadence into that of Symbolism: that is the course which the movement has followed. We can bring ourselves abruptly back by thinking of Oscar Wilde. When Wilde says, "All art is perfectly useless", is not that the logical culmination of Poe's distinction between poetry and truth and of the endeavour of all the Decadents to prove that the poet stands apart from the common needs of mankind? Much has been said about the savagery

with which Wilde was treated. There was more than savagery in the treatment of Wilde. He had the handling which was proper to the last and most flamboyant heresiarch of a heresy which had exhausted its force. Poe unwittingly began the process. Like many another before him, he founded a sect without knowing that he was doing so and it developed into something which would have surprised him.

Its living effect is now spent. There are no more Decadents anywhere in the world. But it was not a vain effort. It has left its mark plainly on the history of thought and literature. We must add that in its way it was successful. It made a vigorous and impressive protest against the habits of mind into which humanity was falling during the first half of the nineteenth century. Science has not, as Poe said it did,

dragged Diana from her car,  
And driven the Hamadryad from the wood  
To seek a shelter in some happier star.

But there was a time when it seemed as though it might, by devoting itself too exclusively to its great task-mistress, material progress. There were many protests against this possibility and the Decadence was one of the most powerful of them. A secession may not be the most constructive instrument of policy but it has its spectacular effect. The sufferings of the *poètes maudits*, from Poe himself onwards, were not wasted. They reminded the world that there was something in life besides material progress, a thing real enough for finely gifted men to be willing to suffer for it.

The Decadence has frequently been described, and judged, in terms of pathology, but it is an error to think of it as a disease. There was something very feverish

about many of its manifestations and it was not unattended by the hallucinations which go with a high temperature. But, as everyone knows, a high temperature is not a disease in itself: it is nature's way of fighting a disease. So were Poe and his disciples. They fought their fight, they suffered terrible wounds, they brought new beauty into the world both in their works and in their lives. That is the final thing to be said of Poe himself. His martyrdom, to whatever it was due, to circumstances or to his own weaknesses (and it is clear that these two factors played into one another's hands) is a spectacle which must move the beholder to pity and wonder. He borrowed his five or ten dollars, he strutted absurdly and attacked vindictively, he drank himself so low that after a debauch his clothes were "horrible". But he was one of the few who have brought a new beauty into the world.

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